



Time After Time by mille libri

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Angst, Romance

Language: English

Characters: J. Hopper, Joyce B.

Pairings: J. Hopper/Joyce B.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-07-09 14:30:40

Updated: 2019-12-10 20:58:55

Packaged: 2019-12-12 15:34:47

Rating: T

Chapters: 23

Words: 40,034

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: She stayed in Hawkins and was broken; he got out and came back broken. Now Jim Hopper and Joyce Byers need each other to navigate the horrors they'll face and protect the children in their care - and to heal one another in the process.

1. Drivin' My Life Away

Thank you for reading! This will follow canon, on- and offscreen scenes, through post-season 3 (and hopefully season 4!). I do take suggestions, so if there are scenes you want to see, feel free to let me know.

"Time After Time"

If you're lost, you can look and you will find me

Time after time

If you fall, I will catch you, I will be waiting

Time after time

- Cyndi Lauper

"Drivin' My Life Away"

Ooh, I'm drivin' my life away

Lookin' for a better way for me

- Eddie Rabbitt

The windshield wipers really were slapping out a tempo, Jim Hopper reflected, but it was less than a perfect rhythm with the song on the radio. He reached out a hand, twisting the dial, not in the mood for Eddie Rabbitt, even in a more upbeat mood.

The next station was playing Patsy Cline. Hopper was feeling so lonely, she had that right, but it wasn't crazy. It was the only thing that made any damn sense.

He twisted the dial again. He wasn't in the mood for music, but driving in silence with nothing to listen to but his thoughts would have him driving off a bridge long before he got back to the god-forsaken burg of Hawkins, Indiana.

Irony: that he, Hawkins's least-favorite son, should be fleeing back to it as a safe harbor to take over its police force. How some of the old-time cops would laugh at that. He hoped to hell all of them had retired long ago, or this new job would suck even worse than it already promised to.

Picking up the beer can he held snugged between his thighs, Hopper drained it and threw it out the open window.

At least nothing ever happened in Hawkins. Youthful indiscretions like his own had been the worst the tiny Hawkins police force had had to deal with in his memory, and he couldn't imagine much had changed. On the one hand, he had always hated that bucolic bliss and was pretty sure he was going to be bored out of his mind. On the other hand ... he didn't have it in him to be a real cop anymore. He had looked too hard into the abyss to feel anything but sympathy for those who were lost in it. And if he couldn't solve his own problems, how the hell was he supposed to be out there working for the good of others?

A memory flashed through his mind, of Sara giggling, holding his badge up above her head, running off with it, as he chased after her, annoyed because he was late for work. The idea that he could ever have been annoyed with her sickened him. He wasn't worthy of being a father. Or a husband, apparently. Not that he blamed Diane. She wanted to heal, to move forward with her life, to have another child someday, and Hopper was too frozen and terrified and lost to do any more than stand still. And even that was too much to ask some days.

He twisted the dial again, from the Righteous Brothers to the Rolling Stones. Keith Richards' screams should have been enough to take his mind off things, but they sounded too much like the screams in Hopper's head. More dial-twisting. A commercial now, for some local insurance company. Like insurance helped. Oh, sure, it saved you a little money on the funeral, but it didn't make the person you loved any less dead, and it didn't dig your heart up out of the coffin where it lay next to her.

Mile after mile of farm rolled by outside his window, bringing him inevitably closer to Hawkins. He didn't know why he had called Hawkins Police that day, the day he knew for sure that he couldn't go on being a New York City cop, that Diane wasn't going to let him go on being her husband, and that he didn't know if he was even a person any more. He'd been sitting at his desk, contemplating taking his gun to some dark recess of Central Park and ending it all for good, when before he'd been aware of what he was doing, he found himself with the phone in his hand, dialing directory assistance. Why

Hawkins, instead of some random town in some random state where no one knew him? Nothing drew him back there. His parents were long gone, his mother of the cancer not long after Hopper had left to join the army, and his father packed up and gone as soon as she was decently in the ground. Hopper didn't know where he'd gone, and he couldn't say he cared that much. The old bastard hadn't been much of a father to begin with. Granddad had been the one to teach Jim everything that mattered, and he was gone, too, before Jim even entered high school.

As for friends—well, he hadn't had that many. Oh, he'd screwed a fair number of girls, and he bet most of them were still in town, which was likely to be awkward mostly and entertaining occasionally. And he'd hung out with a bunch of losers who were probably boring bean-counters now, married with a gaggle of kids.

There was only one person he really wanted to see. It was probably stupid, thinking someone who had never left Hawkins could understand what he had gone through, but Joyce had always listened back in high school, sitting there bumming his smokes and letting him talk about how much he hated his life and how bad he wanted to get out of Hawkins and never look back.

He knew she was still there—after he'd gotten the job as chief of police, he'd looked her up. Not Horowitz anymore, but Byers. She'd gone and married Lonnie Byers, the idiot. Hopper couldn't imagine that being a happy marriage. Lonnie had only ever been interested in himself and what he could get out of someone. It still pissed Hopper off that she'd chosen Lonnie, and it pissed him off even more that he still remembered the exact shape and color of her big brown eyes.

And what did he think, anyway, that he was going to sit down with her and spill his guts about Sara and Diane and the war and everything that had happened since the last time they'd seen each other and she was going to magically make it all go away?

"Don't be a chump, Hopper," he muttered. He didn't know the song on the radio, but he spun the dial anyway, savagely. Static.

Finally, something on the radio that reflected what was inside him.

Popping open another can of beer, he pressed his foot down harder on the gas pedal. Might as well get there faster. Whatever lay ahead of him in Hawkins, it had to be better than the demons he was carrying with him.

2. What Becomes of the Broken Hearted

Thank you for reading!

"What Becomes of the Broken-Hearted"

The roots of love grow all around

But for me they come a-tumblin' down

Every day heartaches grow a little stronger

I can't stand this pain much longer

- Jimmy Ruffin

Hopper had been back in Hawkins about three weeks when he saw her for the first time. She was behind the counter at Melvald's—which was pretty damn funny, considering how much they'd shoplifted from the place back in high school, Hopper thought.

Her head snapped up as soon as the bell rang above the door, and her big brown eyes got wide when she recognized him. God, she was thin. Too thin. She'd never been heavy, but now her face was practically all eyes. And she looked so scared, like she was ready for whatever came in to take another shot at her. Damn Lonnie Byers, anyway, if he could take someone so pretty and funny and full of life and suck it all out of her. Hopper had heard that Lonnie ran out on her a couple of years ago, leaving her with two boys to take care of on her own. He couldn't help envying her anyway—at least she had her kids.

"Hopper," she said, her throaty voice unchanged and full of wonder.

"Hey, Joyce. How've you been?"

"Oh, you know. You?" That she had heard about him was obvious from the way her hand flew up to cover her mouth as soon as the words came out, and he wanted to tell her, to lean on the counter and bum a smoke and tell her about Sara, about how funny she'd

been and how much she'd made him laugh and how she was the best thing that had ever happened to him, until losing her was the worst thing that had ever happened ...

But he didn't know this stranger behind the counter, this Joyce Byers, not at all, and he couldn't tell her things, not the way he used to be able to talk to Joyce Horowitz.

He didn't know what to say into the silence, so he settled for, "Yeah."

"I was surprised you came back."

Hopper shrugged. "They had an opening, I needed a job. So here I am."

"Welcome back?"

With a bitter chuckle, he mimed cheerleading with pom-poms. "Rah rah." They looked at each other, silence hanging heavy between them. "I heard about Lonnie."

"Come to gloat? Yeah, you were right. Happy now?" For all the residual anger in her voice, at least she sounded like the Joyce he used to know. He remembered the fight they'd had about Lonnie—the fights, really—and how he had predicted an unhappy end to the relationship. So had everyone, but he had been the loudest because it had hurt him the most.

"Not so much, no."

Her face softened. "Hop. I really am sorry. About—well, about a lot of things."

"Yeah, me, too." He cleared his throat and gestured toward the pharmacy. "Hey, the doc around back there?"

She nodded, and he tipped his hat to her before heading back to get his prescription refilled.

Joyce watched him go, her heart aching for him. She wished there was something she could do, something she could say, to ease the

pain she saw burning in the back of those blue eyes she had once known so well. Thinking of Jonathan and Will, she tried to imagine what it would be like to lose one of them, and couldn't see straight for the pain of it. And when you had such a big heart, the way Hopper did, and you put so much of it into anything you could love, and then you lost it—it must feel like having your heart ripped out of your chest.

But what could she say? Words wouldn't bring his daughter back, or fix his marriage, any more than words made Jonathan feel better every time his father missed a weekend, or made Will understand why Lonnie only liked him when they were doing things that Lonnie wanted to do. She did her best, tried to be everything to them, father and mother, but boys needed a father. They at least needed a mother who didn't work all the time, who was home when they got home from school, who knew how to cook and wasn't afraid of her shadow and didn't lose her keys all the time and ... and had her act together. And that wasn't Joyce. Not now, and maybe it never had been. Lonnie said so, that she'd never been all there, that she'd never been good enough. Maybe he was right.

Watching Hopper's broad back—she'd forgotten how tall he was, the way he filled up a room—Joyce remembered that Hopper had thought she was good enough. How he had listened when she talked, and encouraged her to study harder and get better grades and get out of Hawkins, even go to college. But it had been easier to believe when Lonnie told her she didn't need to worry, that he'd take care of her.

Joyce shook her head. What a load of hooley that had been. What an idiot she'd been to believe it.

As she so often did, she resolved to do better, to be more of what Jonathan and Will needed. She was lucky to have them, and she never wanted to forget how lucky or take them for granted. Will had a birthday coming up, and somehow it felt like if she could get him just the right thing—not something too expensive, of course, but something he would really love—then maybe she could get back on track. And then if she could save up enough for the camera Jonathan wanted—

Hopper turned around, tucking a bottle of pills into his pocket, and ambled back toward the front of the store. "Joyce."

"Hopper. Have a nice day!" she called after him, the words too much of an ingrained habit to forget. He paused a moment at the door, as if he wanted to respond, and she braced for the sarcasm. But then he went through the door, silently, leaving the bell ringing above him as though he'd been just another customer.

Joyce would have preferred the sarcasm.

3. White Rabbit

"White Rabbit"

When logic and proportion have fallen sloppy dead

And the white knight is talking backwards

And the red queen's off with her head

- Jefferson Airplane

The nights were the worst. Hopper could make it through his days, despite the boredom of the job and the incredible stupidity of some of his cops and the mind-numbing tedium of living in Hawkins. A steady flow of cigarettes, supplemented with coffee and anxiety meds, took the edge off and made the days bearable.

But at night, when the TV went to snow and he turned off the lights and lay there alone in the dark with nothing but his thoughts—that's when the demons came out. The exquisite pain of every memory of Sara's all-too-brief life playing against the screen of the dark wall, the anguish of reliving every moment of what-if, every time he could have done something differently and maybe she would have lived. It was that kind of thing, that attitude that everything was his responsibility, and that he could have done something, that had been the final straw for Diane. She'd accused him of making everything about him, of having some kind of God complex—or, at other times, a martyr complex—and of forgetting Sara while he wallowed in his own pain.

Unspoken was that he had forgotten Diane, too, and that was true. Lost, unable to find safe ground, he couldn't reach for her, didn't know how to be the husband of a grieving mother any more than he knew how to get past being a grieving father.

When the ghosts of his daughter and his wife—not dead, but as lost to him as though she might have been—rose up and began speaking to him, that's when the coffee gave way to beer and then the harder stuff, and the anxiety meds gave way to whatever else he could

convince his doctor to prescribe for him. And Hopper had always been good at convincing people, so it was a pretty wide range.

Enough stuff thrown down his throat and oblivion would come, usually while he lay on the couch watching the static on the TV, far, far into the night. And then morning would jerk him awake, the sun over the pond gleaming through the window, breaking into the oblivion he had tried so hard to reach. He'd roll over and over on the couch, getting another ten minutes here, half an hour there, but with the deeper sleep broken the dreams came, the ones where he reached for Sara in the water and had to watch her slipping away, or she was trapped in a burning building and he got close enough to watch the flames engulf her, or worse, when reality gave way altogether and she turned into something grotesque. So he would eventually drag himself off the couch, his head pounding, and the caffeine and nicotine infusions would start all over again.

Other nights, he tried to stave off the darkness and the memories and the guilt in more ... creative ways. Hawkins had a fair number of lonely single women and divorcees, and for some reason many of them were drawn to the new police chief. A few because they remembered him in high school, a few because they liked the power or got off on uniforms and the illusion of authority, and a disturbing number because they were drawn to his pain and wanted to fix him, or mother him, or drown their own sorrows with him.

Still, sooner or later they all fell asleep, and then it was just like any other night, only with an awkward good-bye waiting for him in the morning. He had slowed down his progress through the ladies of Hawkins recently, and only partially because he was afraid eventually he would run out and there would only be one left ... and he could never have used her like that, anyway. No. Joyce Byers was off limits.

All in all, though, it wasn't the worst life. Hawkins was just what he remembered, and the job was easy because nothing ever happened. And if Sara haunted his dreams, at least that was better than forgetting what she looked like, which he couldn't have borne.

For once, Joyce had gotten up early on a Saturday morning. Most

nights she had such trouble falling asleep that mornings came hard, and the effort of getting up in time to make the boys breakfast was more than she could manage.

But she had determined to turn over a new leaf, to be a better mom, so out of bed it was.

Only once she was upright and half-dressed did she realize she could already smell bacon. And coffee. And from the kitchen she heard the high-pitched giggle that always made her smile. She eased her door open just slightly as she was buttoning her shirt so she could hear them talking to each other.

"Can you do the pancakes in funny shapes again?"

"You mean, like your face?"

Will giggled again. "Yeah."

"Sure."

Jonathan was so grown-up, so good with his brother. Too much of both, Joyce worried. A teenager should rebel more, have more fun, go out with his friends. God knew she had done all three. But Jonathan seemed to prefer staying home, taking care of his little brother, and taking pictures. His pictures looked good to Joyce, and she knew he was serious about photography and eventually about film school, but still ... She couldn't help feeling as though, if she hadn't been such a mess, Jonathan could have had a more normal life.

"You hanging out with your weird friends again today?" Jonathan asked. She could hear the sizzle as a pancake hit the skillet.

"They're not weird."

"Come on, kid. Of course they are. So are you."

"Well, then, you are, too!" Will sounded pleased with his comeback.

"Sure am. Who'd want to be boring like the rest of Hawkins, anyway?"

"Isn't there anyone you want to be friends with?"

Jonathan thought that one over. He was often more willing to be honest with his little brother than he was with anyone else. "Maybe. A couple of kids. But ... I doubt they'd get me."

They probably wouldn't. Hawkins was the same old boring one-size-fits-all place it had been when Joyce was in high school. Will was lucky he'd found a few other boys who liked geeky space stuff and books. They'd started playing some weird game where they rolled dice and pretended to be fantasy characters a year or so ago. Joyce didn't understand it, but it made Will happy, so that was all she really cared about. They spent hours in Mike Wheeler's basement. Mike's mom Karen was a nice woman, but very ... traditional. It was hard to believe she'd given birth to someone as unusual as Mike.

Slipping out of her bedroom, Joyce came into the kitchen, surprised as always by the bright smiles her boys had for her. Some part of her always felt like she didn't deserve them to be happy to see her, not when she screwed up so many things. "Smells great, Jonathan. Thanks for cooking." Joyce herself was a terrible cook. Jonathan had learned out of self-defense, and his food was so much better than anything she could make.

"Did you get enough sleep?" he asked her, giving her a concerned look. She was filled with guilt all over again. It shouldn't have been her teenage son's worry how she slept.

"I did." She hadn't, but it didn't matter. "I could use some of that coffee, though." Cup in hand, she went over to the table, resting a hand on the top of Will's head. He had pushed his half-eaten pancakes aside and was drawing a picture, his face intent. She recognized the robed character on the page, a more and more frequent subject these days. "What's Will the Wise up to?"

"After school yesterday, Mike said we might be going in a cave, searching for a dragon."

"A dragon? Can you guys take down a dragon?"

Will grinned at her. "Of course."

"Of course. Will the Wise always knows what to do." Over Will's head, Joyce and Jonathan traded smiles.

Jonathan poured more batter, evidently for Joyce's pancakes. He liked to feed her, worrying that she was too thin. "What kind of spells are you going to use?" he asked Will.

As Will launched into an enthusiastic description, Joyce watched her boys, thinking how lucky she was that they were so good together, and so good with her. Maybe she'd done something right after all.

4. Walk on By

Thank you for reading!

"Walk on By"

Foolish pride

Is all that I have left

So let me hide

The tears and the sadness

- Dionne Warwick

Joyce was restocking a shelf full of laundry detergent when she heard the door bell jingle and heavy footsteps coming across the floor. "Be right there!" she called.

Hopper came around the corner, lifting his hat slightly, although there was nothing else about him that would have indicated he knew her at all. Come to think of it, he'd probably have been more polite if it had been someone else, Joyce thought. "Don't worry about it," he said as he went past. "I know the way."

"Sure. Of course you do." She watched him walk down the aisle to the pharmacy. Another prescription, then.

By now everyone knew about him, including Dr. Barnes behind the counter, but as long as the prescriptions were legitimate, which they always seemed to be, no one could do anything about his continued abuse of the prescription drugs. Or his drinking. Or the way he slept around. Apparently he was still charming when he wanted to be, enough so that woman after woman overlooked the big flashing red danger sign and thought she could fix him.

Not that Joyce would have known that from talking to him. The most she ever got from him was a tip of the hat and a "Joyce."

And then she'd do what she was doing now—watch him go by and worry that he was going to kill himself, the rate he was going, and worry even more that maybe that was what he was trying to do.

She picked up most of her information from listening to gossip, although even that was hard to do—enough people remembered them being together in high school that they didn't want to talk about him in front of her.

Not that she had any business worrying about him, anyway—she had Jonathan and Will to worry about, and that was enough for any given day.

He came back down the aisle while she was still standing there holding a carton of detergent. "Joyce."

"Hopper."

As he went by, she turned around, suddenly anxious to get something more out of him than that, just to reassure herself. "Nice to see you."

Startled, he stopped, looking at her over his shoulder. "Yeah. Same here." Then he kept going, and she heard the bell jingle again as he left.

Well, that had been a bust. She wished she hadn't said anything. Sighing, she heaved the detergent onto the shelf and reached for the next box.

In the grocery store, Hopper rounded a corner, his cart full of beer and cold cuts and chips so that anyone who didn't know him—anyone who didn't live in Hawkins—would think maybe he was having a party. Party of one, he thought. Pity party, he added with a bitter smile.

The smile was still on his face when he recognized the small, thin figure in front of him, reaching up for a box of cereal that had been pushed to the back of the top shelf.

Briefly, shamefully, he considered turning around and exiting the aisle, pretending he was never here and hadn't seen her. Then he

kicked himself and called himself a coward and continued down the aisle, reaching easily over her head to grasp the box.

Joyce's eyes widened in surprise when she recognized him, and she clutched the box of cereal to her chest when he handed it to her. She was still way too thin, her face drawn and worried and all eyes. Did she never stop to eat? Or did she give the lion's share to her growing boys and go hungry herself?

Without seeming to, Hopper looked over the items in her cart. Other than the pricy new Donkey Kong cereal she was holding, everything else was generic, or on sale. Cans of vegetables five for a dollar, pasta, hamburger.

She must have noticed him looking, even though he had used his best police glance, because she said defensively, "This stuff is new. Will really wanted to try it. All his friends have it."

Her life in three sentences, he thought. Trying to keep up with the middle class of Hawkins on the pittance Donald probably paid her at Melvald's. Skimping and saving so she could buy small treats for the boys.

"Looks like good stuff. I haven't had anything like that in—" He closed his eyes in pain, Sara sneaking up on him the way she did any time he tried to be normal. Because of course the last time he'd eaten whimsical cereal had been with her.

Joyce's face mirrored the pain he felt. She had always been like that, sensitive to the feelings of people around her, taking them on as her own. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Yep." Without another word, he steered his cart around hers and left her there in the aisle with her precious box of cereal.

On the sidewalk outside the movie theater, waiting in line for the doors to open for *Poltergeist*—a luxury she probably shouldn't have splurged on, but the look on Will's face when she told him they could go had been more than worth it—Joyce saw Hopper coming. Briefly, she wondered if he was seeing the movie, then realized how

impossible that would be for him. Ghosts, and a possessed little girl? Not in a million years was he ready for something like that.

To her surprise, he slowed when he saw her. "Joyce."

"Hopper." When he didn't continue on, she hastily added, "This is my son, Will. Will, Chief Hopper."

"Hey, kid." Hopper held out a hand for Will to shake, which Will did, somewhat hesitantly. Why did people shake hands, anyway, Joyce wondered. Seemed like a good way to pass germs along more than anything else. "You sure you're up for this?" He gestured toward the marquee, which spelled out POLTERGEIST in big black letters.

"Yeah! I can handle it," Will said confidently. Joyce wasn't so sure, but she supposed they would see. Truth be told, he was probably more ready for the scary movie than she was. "My mom got us tickets."

Hopper glanced at her, quickly, then looked back at Will. "She's a good mom."

Will nodded. "The best."

Joyce couldn't help but smile. She ruffled Will's hair. "I don't know about that, buddy, but I suppose I have my moments."

"You have lots of them," Will assured her. He moved up in line, leaving Joyce and Hopper looking at one another.

"Good kid," Hopper said. He was impressed by the kid's open face and confidence. You heard a lot about Joyce and her boys, but everything he had seen of them indicated she was doing a good job with them, despite the challenges.

"Thanks. He's ... He's going to be someone special," she said, her eyes lingering on him with a look that touched Hopper's heart even as his chest flooded with bitter envy.

"Well. Enjoy the movie," he said gruffly, and he moved off, leaving her to catch up with Will, the specter of Sara in front of him a more haunting image than any film studio could dream up.

5. Help!

Thank you for reading!

"Help!"

Help, I need somebody

Help, not just anybody

- The Beatles

Hopper's day had started the same as usual—woken from a stupor by the neighbor's dog while the TV babbled away to itself. A glance at his watch told him he was late for work, again. Lukewarm shower in his tiny bathroom, in which the showerhead was below the level of his head, involving his usual crouching and contortions to rinse the soap out of his hair. Brush the crud of last night's booze and cigarettes off his teeth, begin again with today's layer by washing his pills down with a can of Schlitz while starting on the day's first cigarette. Uniform on, gun in its holster, grab the keys, out the door.

Never changed. Always the same. What he loved and hated about Hawkins in equal measure.

Joyce had lost track of how many times she had paced Hopper's office. She'd known it was bad, but she'd had no idea he showed up to work this late. She fumbled another cigarette from the pack, getting it between her lips with trembling fingers. Her whole body was shaking so badly it was a wonder she got the thing lit. And then it didn't help, because Will was gone.

Gone. It was almost impossible to believe. Joyce couldn't imagine what could possibly have happened to him in Hawkins. He had ridden his bike home from the Wheelers' hundreds of times, at least, over the last several years. There was no way he'd gotten lost, which meant he had to be hurt somewhere.

To think it had started off like any other morning, hunting for her perennially lost keys while Jonathan made breakfast. That seemed like so long ago, like her reality had been this nameless dread and fear, this holding of the breath waiting for Will to be found, for ... years. Decades.

It still felt like any other morning to Hopper as he pulled into his parking spot in front of the police station—perks of the job, he always got the front spot, no matter how late he showed up. The snarky "Good of you to show" from his secretary, Flo, the lazy 'good mornings' exchanged with his cops, the card game they were in the middle of, feet propped up on their desks. Nothing ever happened in Hawkins, after all.

"Damn! You look like hell, Chief," Callahan said—also just like he did every other morning. The sameness was both comforting and infuriating.

Filling his favorite mug with coffee, Hopper tossed off a one-liner about Callahan's wife, getting the usual laugh.

Flo had followed him from the door. "While you were drinking, or sleeping, or whatever else you deemed so necessary on a Monday morning, Phil Larson called, said some kids were stealing the gnomes out of his garden again." As usual, she plucked the cigarette out of his mouth and stubbed it out in an ashtray kept on Callahan's desk just for that purpose, as far as Hopper could tell.

He chuckled at the idea of the Hawkins police on the trail of the Garden Gnome Gnapper, snagging a doughnut out of the box on the side table.

"Garden gnomes again. Well, I'll tell you what, I'm gonna get right on that."

Flo ignored his sarcasm, proffering a pink slip with a telephone message. "On a more pressing matter, Joyce Byers can't find her son this morning."

Hopper changed around some cards in Powell's hand, ignoring the

way his pulse leaped and refusing to consider whether it was because of Joyce or because of the idea of something happening to a kid. This was Hawkins—nothing ever happened in Hawkins. The kid was probably hiding, ran away, got lost, stayed over at a friend's and forgot to call. Joyce had probably found him already.

"Okay. I'm gonna get on that," he said through a mouthful of doughnut. "Just give me a minute." He needed his usual time to let the caffeine and nicotine and sugar go to work on his pounding headache, to lay his head down on the desk and try to remember what it was he was doing here in Hawkins pretending to still be a cop.

Flo was still following him. "Joyce was very upset. She—"

"Flo, Flo, we've discussed this. Mornings are for coffee and contemplation." Flo kept talking, but he overrode her. "Coffee, and contemplation, Flo."

She gave up and let him head back to his office, and he was feeling pretty good about this morning's interactions—until he walked into his office and found Joyce Byers there, hunched over in a chair, looking so small and so frail.

Joyce got up as soon as Hopper appeared in the doorway, torn between relief that he was finally here and anger that it had taken so long.

"Joyce."

"Hopper! Where the hell have you been?"

"I ..." He couldn't tell her. Hell, she probably knew, but he couldn't say it, not to her. "I'm sorry I was late. How can I help you?"

"It's Will. My boy. You met him before, remember? At the movies? Please, Hopper, you have to help me find him. Please."

"You're sure he's not just hiding out somewhere? Stayed at a friend's and forgot to call?" He rounded the corner of the desk, putting down his coffee and doughnut.

"Don't you think I would have called them before I came here?" she snapped.

"Yeah. Maybe." He sank down in his chair. "What do you want me to do?"

"Do?! Hopper, my son is missing. Missing! I want you to help me find out what happened to him."

Sighing, he opened a drawer, pulled out a piece of paper, and loaded it in his typewriter. "MISSING", he wrote on the Incident line while Joyce hovered over his desk, her eyes darting back and forth between his face and the typewriter arm and somewhere off in the distance where her worry lived.

"I have been waiting here—" Joyce checked her watch. "Over an hour, Hopper."

"And I apologize, again," he said, holding his temper in check with an effort. That he was angry with himself for being such a loser made him more angry with her, and she had enough to bear right now without his irrationality on top of it.

"I'm going out of my mind here."

"Look, a boy his age, he's probably just playing hooky."

"No," she broke in, before he could say any more. He didn't know Will, or he'd know better. "Not my Will. He's not like that, he wouldn't do that."

"Well, you never know. I mean, my mom thought I was on the debate team when really I was just screwing Chrissy Carpenter in the back of my dad's Oldsmobile, so ..." He knew she remembered that. She had teased him about it later, when he no longer cared about lying to his parents, or about Chrissy Carpenter.

Joyce gave him a withering look. Yeah, she remembered. "Look, he's not like you, Hopper. He's not like me. He's not like ... most. He has a couple of friends, but you know kids—they're, they're mean, they make fun of him, they call him names, they, they laugh at him, his clothes—"

"His clothes? What's wrong with his clothes?" Hopper asked.

She didn't want to mention that she had to shop at the Goodwill because it was all she could afford, and that too often the sleeves of the shirts and the legs of the pants were too short because it was so hard to find time to actually go and buy new things. Why did that stuff have to matter, anyway? This was Hawkins, not ... Chicago. Or New York. "I don't know! Does that matter?"

"Maybe?"

"Look, he's—he's a sensitive kid. Lonnie—Lonnie used to say he was queer. Called him a fag." She didn't want to mention that, either, but somehow it came out.

"Is he?"

"He's missing! Is what he is."

They were both silent for a moment, and Joyce could see the exact moment Hopper thought he had the answer. Given their history, she was a little surprised it had taken this long.

Lonnie, Hopper thought. Of course. Custody dispute, sheer cussedness on Lonnie's part to mess with Joyce's head, an argument with the kid ending in him thinking Dad's house would be better—had to be. "When was the last time you heard from Lonnie?"

She sank into a chair, trying to remember. "Last I heard, he was in Indianapolis. That was about a year ago. But he has nothing to do with this."

Hopper ignored her assertion, reaching for a pen. "Why don't you give me his number."

"No. Hopper. He has nothing to do with this, trust me." The day Lonnie gave a damn about either of their boys was the day Joyce would spread her wings and fly out of Hawkins like a bird.

He raised his voice to be heard over her insistence. "Joyce! Ninety-nine out of a hundred times, kid goes missing, kid is with a parent or relative."

"Well, what about the other time?"

"What?"

"You said, ninety-nine out of a hundred. What about the other time?"

God, she could be so literal. He had forgotten that about her. "Joyce." The word was lost in her flood of them.

"The one. The one!" she repeated, leaning toward him, her big eyes intent on his face.

"Joyce," he said softly. "This is Hawkins. Okay? You want to know the worst thing that's ever happened here, in the four years I've been working here? Do you want to know the worst thing? Is when an owl attacked Eleanor Gillespie's head because it thought that her hair was a nest."

He wasn't wrong. Joyce forced herself to take a breath and remember that this was Hawkins. "Okay, fine. I will call Lonnie. He will talk to me before he talks to—"

"What, a pig?" Hopper muttered. He remembered Lonnie's views on law enforcement. He remembered Lonnie's views on him, for that matter.

"A cop."

They looked at each other across the desk, both agreeing without words that it was far better for Joyce to call Lonnie than Chief Jim Hopper of the Hawkins Police.

Joyce leaned across the desk. "Just find my son, Hop. Find him!"

"I'll do my best."

Mollified, she left the room, not looking forward to talking to Lonnie. Hopper watched her go, wondering exactly what his best was these days, and if it would be good enough.

Hell, he thought. It had to be. Wherever the kid was, there had to be a simple explanation.

6. For What It's Worth

Thank you for reading!

"For What It's Worth"

I think it's time we stop, children, what's that sound

Everybody look what's goin' down

- Buffalo Springfield

Hopper had gotten Joyce to give him the names of the kids her son hung out with, and felt damn lucky to find them all still at the school, even though the school day had been over now for a couple of hours. For the first time he felt a stirring of misgiving—if the kid's friends were the kind of nerds who stayed late to play with a ham radio, he probably was, too. Less likely to be hiding out and skipping that way.

Following the principal down the halls to fetch the boys, Hopper remembered Bob the Brain from high school, who had started the whole AV Club thing for nerdy kids just like him. Bob would never have thought of skipping school. Damn it, it had to be Lonnie, didn't it? The last thing Hopper wanted to do was talk to Lonnie after all this time, after what Lonnie had done to Joyce, after abandoning his boys. What kind of father walked out on his kids, for God's sake?

He was getting pretty hot under the collar just thinking of it when they came to the room where the boys were crouched together over the radio. Nerds one and all.

They hauled the kids down to the principal's office and explained the situation. It was obvious from the looks on their faces that they didn't know where the kid was, that this was far from normal behavior, and that they were worried. Remembering the little boy with the big eyes he had met with Joyce at the movies, Hopper wondered if maybe Joyce's kid was the weak one of the bunch, the one the others all protected.

"I'm sorry, you were playing what?"

"D and D. It's a game. You fight monsters," said the serious one, Mike.

"It's stupid." Lucas seemed like the tough one.

"It's not stupid!" interjected the third one, Dustin, the goofy one. "It's an excellent exploration of storytelling and—"

"Yeah, I bet you guys are great at telling stories. How about you tell me about Will. Where does he go after he leaves D and D? Straight home?"

Well, that had been a mistake—they all started talking at once, very fast, overlapping and contradicting each other, which wasn't doing Hopper's headache any favors at all. One of them mentioned a road, but either Hopper didn't catch the name correctly or the kid wasn't in any Hawkins Hopper recognized.

"Okay, okay, okay! One at a time. All right?" He made eye contact with Mike. "You. You said he takes what?"

"Mirkwood."

"Mirkwood," Hopper repeated. He looked at Powell. "Have you ever heard of Mirkwood?"

"I have not. That sounds made up to me."

"No," Lucas said. "It's from *Lord of the Rings*."

"Well, *The Hobbit*," Dustin corrected.

Lucas looked at him like that was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard, which saved Hopper from having to look like that. "It doesn't matter!"

Dustin snapped back, "He asked!"

They devolved into an argument, completely forgetting the situation at hand, and Hopper leaned forward in his chair. "Hey. Hey, hey! What'd I just say? One at a damn time." God, kids were exhausting. Give him a biker dude you could threaten to beat up any day over a

bunch of kids. He looked at Mike again. "You."

"Mirkwood," Mike confirmed. "It's a real road, it's just the name that's made up. It's where Cornwallis and Curley meet."

Hopper nodded, recognizing the location.

Eagerly, Mike offered, "We can show you, if you want."

"I said that I know it!" The last thing he needed was three other kids going missing. One was enough. Too much.

But Mike wasn't going to be discouraged so easily. "We can help look."

"No."

All three were in now, offering their help, voices overlapping each other again as they tried to convince him.

He raised his voice to be heard above the din. "I said no. After school, you are all to go home, immediately. That means no biking around looking for your friend, no investigating, no nonsense. This isn't some *Lord of the Rings* book."

"*The Hobbit*," Dustin corrected him, again.

Lucas reached across Mike and smacked Dustin in the arm. "Shut up!"

Hopper was starting to like Lucas.

Dustin punched back, the two of them losing track of what else was going on again. Hopper leaned forward in his seat. Very quietly, he said, "Do I make myself clear?"

Mike, sitting between the other two and completely ignoring them, was looking at the floor, lost in thought. He was plotting an investigation. Hopper would have bet money on it.

He got to his feet, towering over the three boys on the couch. They shrank back. "Do I make myself clear?"

All three nodded, throwing in some "yes, sir"s.

He hoped to hell they meant it ... but he wouldn't have, at the same age. He'd have said what the man in authority wanted to hear and then done what he wanted. He'd have to keep an eye out for the three musketeers. Hopefully they wouldn't get in the way too much.

Having been given strict instructions by Hopper to let him handle things, Joyce felt completely at loose ends. She had to do something; she couldn't just sit there.

She went home, and she and Jonathan went out into the woods. They had looked all over this morning, but in a hurry, frantically. Now they went slower, watching their feet, taking their time.

Joyce tried Castle Byers again, hoping against hope that she would pull the curtain aside and find him there ... but the mattress was empty. The whole place was empty.

The two of them called for him until the very sound of their voices was frightening because the woods were so empty and still and anything could have happened to him. They found themselves drawing closer and closer together until at last they were holding each other, both crying and trying not to let the other one see.

Hopper had come out to 'Mirkwood' with his deputies, and they walked down the road, calling Will's name. He wanted to find the kid, wanted it to be this easy—a fall, a sprained ankle or a broken leg, a frightened and cold kid who would be right as rain after a night in the hospital—but something in him didn't believe it would be.

The uneasiness grew when he found Will's bike, abandoned, and no Will anywhere near. If the kid had been well enough to walk away, he'd have taken the bike. As short on money as Joyce was? There wasn't going to be another bike anytime soon if the kid lost this one. And he'd have known it. Staring into the woods past the abandoned bike, Hopper felt the prickle on the back of his neck that said something was really wrong. Something had happened to this kid, to

Joyce's son.

He picked up the bike and took it back to the truck with him. He was going to have to come back out with a proper search party, and that would take time to put together.

7. Runaway

7

"Runaway"

I'm a walkin' in the rain

Tears are fallin' and I feel a pain

A wishin' you were here by me

To end this misery

- Del Shannon

When they didn't find Will, or any trace of him, in the woods, Joyce came back to the house and did what she had been putting off all morning—she called her ex-husband. And, of course, she got some tramp he must be shacked up with. 'Cynthia'. Of course she'd be a Cynthia. She sounded like a Cynthia.

Even with her back to him, Joyce knew how Jonathan was sitting. Closed in on himself, like he could disappear if he tried hard enough. The way he always sat when Lonnie was involved. If she'd had any sense, she would have kicked Lonnie to the curb before he had the chance to hurt Jonathan as deeply as he had. One of many regrets she'd carry with her the rest of her life.

She tried so hard to remain calm while Lonnie's Cynthia brushed her off, so hard. But she was so afraid for Will and so upset at the idea that Lonnie might be involved and so unhappy in general that her voice rose and her hand tightened on the phone without her meaning them to. And then Cynthia hung up on her, and Joyce slammed the phone on the wall and screamed "Bitch!" at it.

"Mom," Jonathan chastised her from the other room.

"What?!"

"You have to stay calm."

Calm. Right. Because she did calm so well where Lonnie was concerned. Joyce dialed the number again, getting an answering machine. On the one hand, she was glad not to have to talk to 'Cynthia' again. On the other hand, answering machines turned her into a stammering fool. She held on to her temper, and her cool, with both hands, long enough to leave what she hoped was a coherent message, and then lost it again on the phone, slamming it onto the hook two or three times while she shouted at it.

That was when Hopper showed up, with Will's bike in tow.

This was a whole different Hopper than she'd talked to this morning. Then, he hadn't taken her seriously. Now, he was worried. And while a worried Hopper meant Joyce had reason to worry, she already had been nearly out of her mind—and a worried Hopper was a sharper Hopper, one who would be able to think things through and find her boy. She was sure of it.

Hopper went through the house, looking for clues, spending time out in the shed in the back. There were shotgun shells spilled on a table, evidence of some kind of violence in some smashed wood up against a wall. Something had happened out here. Maybe the kid had made it home, made it to the shed behind his own house, and then been taken. Stranger things had happened ... although not usually in Hawkins.

He had his deputy call back to the office and get a search party together, and he grilled Joyce, as gently as he could, considering how on edge she was, about any detail about Will that might be helpful.

Then they spread out, flashlights in hand, moving slowly through the woods, calling for Will.

Behind him, Hopper heard a voice. "He's a good student."

Turning, he saw the teacher there, the one who had been with Will's friends this afternoon. "What?"

"Will? He's a good student. Great one, actually."

Hopper couldn't help thinking of the little boy with the big eyes—

Joyce's eyes—he had met at the movie theater. Joyce had been a good student, too, or could have been, once long ago. It hurt to think she had lost her son, and that pain brought up other pain, old pain, pain that he didn't want to deal with now, or ever again.

The teacher held out his hand. "I don't think we've met. Scott Clark. I teach at Hawkins Middle. Earth and biology."

"I've always had a distaste for science."

"Well, maybe you had a bad teacher," Scott Clark offered.

"Man, Miss Ratliff was a piece o' work."

The teacher chuckled. "Ratliff? You bet. She's still kickin' around, believe it or not."

"Oh, I believe it. Mummies never die, or so they tell me." Before he knew what he was saying, he went on, "Sara, my daughter ... Galaxies and universe and whatnot? She really understood all that stuff. I always figured there was enough goin' on down here, I never needed to look elsewhere."

"Your daughter, what grade is she? Maybe I'll get her in my class."

"No, she, uh ..." But he couldn't say it. Just this once, he wanted to have a story that ended differently. Before he could stop himself, he found himself lying to a teacher ... just like old times. "She lives with her mom in the city. Thanks for comin' out, Teach. We really appreciate it."

And he pushed his way farther into the woods, as much to outrun the ghosts behind him as to find the living child.

Hopper hadn't thought having Joyce or Jonathan out in the search party would be a good idea. Afraid of what they might find, she imagined, and then tried not to imagine it.

Instead, they were set to making up posters with Will's picture on them, posters that could be put up around Hawkins and in the surrounding towns, in case anyone had seen him.

Jonathan had been taking a lot of pictures, more than Joyce had seen in a while, and she felt badly that she hadn't been paying more attention. She leafed through them, impressed as always with his eye for detail, forgetting for a moment that they were looking for one of Will because Will was missing.

"Wow, you took these? They're great," she said to Jonathan. "They really are." Why hadn't she seen these before? How had she lost track and gotten so scattered again? "I know I haven't been there for you," she told him. "I've—I've been working so hard and—I just feel bad, I don't even barely know what's going on with you." She put a hand on his knee. "I'm sorry."

He was silent. He was always so silent, her little boy who was so sensitive, who felt other people's pain so deeply because he was so lost in her own. Damn Lonnie, anyway, and damn herself, for having gotten so caught up in their own problems that they had done this to their son.

"What is it?" she asked him. If you could get the words out of him, it always helped, but it was so hard to do. "Sweetheart?"

"Nothin'." But the quaver in his voice and the sniff that followed the word gave him away.

"Tell me."

He shook his head, saying "no", but Joyce wouldn't let it go. She couldn't, or whatever it was would eat him alive.

"It's just—" At last the words pushed through the barrier in him. "I should've been there for him."

Joyce wanted to cry. Jonathan had always been so responsible around Will, always taken it on himself to stand between Will and anything that might hurt him—especially between Will and Lonnie, to take the burden of their father's anger and disappointment and bitter cutting words on himself so they touched Will as little as possible. Jonathan had taken care of his brother, fed him and driven him places and watched him while she worked. It was, it always had been, too much to ask of a young boy, but he had been there when

no one else was and she had leaned on him, far more than she should have. "No!" she protested. "No, no, you can't do that to yourself. This was not your fault. Do you hear me? He—He's close. I know it." She did, too. That was the nameless thing that had kept her going all day, that somehow she felt like Will was just around the corner, that she could almost see him if she held still enough. "I feel it, in my heart. You just, you have to trust me on this, okay?" She put an arm around him, holding him tight, and reached out for a picture that suddenly seemed to be smiling up at her from the pile on the table. "Look at this one." They looked at it and laughed because it was so Will, so much his smile, bright and shy and happy, and they held the picture and each other.

And then the phone rang. Joyce hurried to it, snatching it off the hook, hoping it was Lonnie, or Hopper, or any news at all. "Hello?"

There was nothing there, only breathing, like there was interference on the line.

"Lonnie? Hopper? Who is this?"

The breathing went on. It almost sounded like someone trying not to cry. Then she realized—it wasn't someone. It was Will. It was the sound he made when Lonnie had called, again, to say he wasn't coming, and Will didn't want her to know how badly he was hurting.

With all her heart, Joyce knew that her son was on the other end of the phone line.

"Will? Will!"

The breathing crying sound deepened into full crying. Then there was a crackling on the line, a strange sound, and Joyce was screaming into the phone "What have you done to my boy?!" and then electricity stabbed through the phone lines, jolting against her fingertips, and she dropped the phone.

Jonathan picked it up, calling "Hello? Who is this?" into it, but the phone was dead, burnt out by that strange power surge.

Joyce could hardly breathe, she was so upset, trying to hold back

tears long enough to tell Jonathan that she had heard Will on the phone, that it was his breathing and she knew it was him, and they held the phone between them as they clung together and wept in fear and confusion and loss.

8. Harden My Heart

Thank you for reading!

"Harden My Heart"

I'm gonna harden my heart

I'm gonna swallow my tears

I'm gonna turn and leave you here

- Quarterflash

After the phone call, Joyce and Jonathan drove into town to the police station. With the phone fried, there was no other way to report what had happened. Hopper's secretary assured them she would give him the message, and he would come out as soon as he could, and it was clear that was the best she was going to do. Whether it was the best she *could* do, Joyce doubted, but she let Jonathan take her home. Despite all of his encouragement, she couldn't settle down. She tried to sleep a little on the couch while waiting for Hopper to come, but how could she when all she could think of was Will out there somewhere, scared, with who knew what kind of terrible things happening to him?

The morning was a relief, because then at least she could do something. The posters. The posters would help, because someone would see Will, because you couldn't keep a little boy locked up. You had to let him out eventually. She clung to that idea, even as Jonathan moved around the kitchen making her breakfast and putting the plate in front of her. She wanted to eat, for his sake, and because she knew she needed to keep up her strength, but she couldn't. The sight, the smell ... It was too much. She reached for another cigarette, and then she and Jonathan both jumped at the sharp rap on the door.

Hopper was exhausted, and discouraged. There had been no sign of the boy. Whatever had happened to him, he was just ... gone. And

the longer he was gone, the worse the results would be. And now he had to deal with Joyce, and tell her he had nothing to tell her, and hear some story about a phone call that sounded unbelievable, when all he really wanted to do was go home, pop a beer and some pills, and try to shut the world away.

"We've been waiting six hours!" she said as soon as the door opened.

He sighed. "I know. I came as soon as I could."

"Six hours."

What did she think he had been doing all this time, sleeping like a baby? "Little bit of trust here, all right? We've been searching all night. Went all the way to Cartersville."

"And?" From the stricken look on her face, she knew what the answer would be.

"Nothing."

She gave a little sob and turned away, her hand over her mouth. Behind her, the older boy, Jonathan, stood, stolid and unresponsive.

Joyce, feeling helpless and frantic, was on the edge of losing her control entirely when Hopper said, quietly, "Flo says you got a phone call?"

Yes. This was something she could do. She could tell Hopper and they could, what, trace the call? That was a thing police did, right? "Yeah." She led him to the phone, watching as he picked up the receiver, scorched and blackened.

"Storm barbecued this pretty good."

"Storm?"

"What else?"

Couldn't he see that something strange had happened here? Why would a storm have fried her phone while she was listening to Will cry? Why not at some other random time? She gestured to the phone,

wanting him to look again, to see something—anything. "You're saying that that's not ... weird?"

"Yeah, it's weird." He hung the handset back up without another look at it.

Jonathan suggested, "Can we, like, trace who made the call, contact —"

"No, it doesn't work like that."

At another time, Joyce would have felt for Hopper, who was obviously tired and worried. But this was her boy out there, and what did it matter how tired they were if they couldn't find him?

Hopper took a deep breath, leaning against the wall, and looked at her sideways. "Now, uh, you're sure it was Will? Because Flo said you just heard some breathing."

"No!" He had to believe her. He had to. If Hopper didn't believe her, who would? "It was him," she said stubbornly. "It was Will. And—he was scared, and then something just—" She was trying not to cry, but she couldn't help remembering how terrified he had sounded and how much she had wanted to reach through the phone line and pull him back to her.

"Probably just a prank call, or somebody trying to scare you." Hopper could see her unraveling, and he would have liked to have whoever the prankster was in front of him right now so he could make the asshole see the error of his ways. He wished he could reach out, reassure her, at least let her know she wasn't alone. But he knew if he broke, if he let her see how much he hurt for her, she would come to pieces altogether. He had to stay calm for both their sakes.

"Who would do that?" Jonathan asked him.

"These things get on TV, brings out all the crazies, you know, false leads, prank calls ..."

"No. Hopper. It was not a prank. It was him."

She was sure of it, because she wanted to believe, and he didn't want

to burst her bubble or destroy her hope, but he needed her at full strength, and calm, and in her right mind. "Joyce."

"Come on, how about a little trust here? What, you think I'm—I'm making this up?"

"I'm not saying that you're making it up. All I'm saying is it's an emotional time for you." He remembered some of the crazy things he had thought after Sara—he had hoped against hope that he had dreamed it all, imagined it, that she was still out there somewhere, because he couldn't bear to give her up.

"You think I don't know my own son's breathing?" Joyce demanded. "Wouldn't you know your own daughter's?" She saw the words land, the wince of pain he couldn't hide, and wished she could take the words back.

They stared at each other for a moment, Joyce desperate and apologetic and anguished, and Hopper hurt and angry and trying to stay calm.

He wasn't going to win against the pain, the tears coming to his eyes, remembering the way Sara's breathing had been at the end, how heavy and short her breath had come. Yes, he would know that if he heard it again. He would never forget it. Trying not to hear it as he went about his daily life took everything he had.

Hopper turned away, moving off until he could get himself under control. Joyce was crying behind him, a reminder that she was in the middle of what he had already gone through, the terror and the anguish and the desperate need to do something, and she needed his help, and that allowed him to push through the pain, to stop thinking like a grieving father or an old friend and to start thinking like a cop again.

"You hear from Lonnie yet?" It was the question he needed to ask, but it was also the question that got under Joyce's skin the quickest, especially coming from him, and he felt an admittedly mean-spirited sense of vengeance when her crying stopped and she snapped a "no" back at him.

"It's been long enough," he said, jamming his hat on his head and turning toward the door. "I'm having him checked out."

"Aw, come on!" Joyce shouted after him. "You're wasting your time!"

He ignored her, wishing he had the strength to stay and try to get through to her but knowing he was too close to the edge to try. It was what he had to do, she had to know that—the parent was so often the culprit in these situations, he wouldn't be doing his job if he took Joyce's word for it that Lonnie wasn't involved.

Sure of that as his course, he headed for his car. Behind him, the door closed and Jonathan called out to him.

"Hopper. Let me go."

Rolling his eyes—couldn't they just let him do his job?—Hopper turned to the kid. "I'm sorry?"

"To Lonnie's. You know, if Will's there, it means he ran away. If he sees the cops, he'll think he's in trouble and he'll ... hide. He's good at hiding." It was the most Hopper had ever heard the kid talk, and he had to admit he made some sense.

"Yeah? Well, cops are good at finding, okay?" He put his hands on Jonathan's arms, holding him there. "Stay here with your mom." Joyce needed someone to be here, anyone who could keep her calm. He punched the kid on the arm, harder than he'd intended, because Jonathan staggered back a couple of steps. "She needs you."

Climbing into the car, Hopper tore out of the driveway, and the exhaustion and the pain and the tension overwhelmed him. Tears streamed down his face—for Sara, for himself, for Joyce, for her kids, for everyone he had let down by not being able to be what they needed. He wished to God he had picked some other town, any other town, where no distraught woman with brown eyes that should never have to weep again could expect him to save the day for her.

9. King of Pain

Thank you for reading!

"King of Pain"

I have stood here before inside the pouring rain

With the world turning circles running 'round my brain

I guess I'm always hoping that you'll end this reign

But it's my destiny to be the king of pain

- The Police

Joyce pulled her chair up next to the phone jack on the wall, placing the phone in her lap. She still wasn't sure where the determination to demand two weeks' advance from Donald, who was a notorious tight-fist, had come from, but one minute she had been shaking, filled with fear, and the next minute words were pouring out of her, about Will and about herself. Not hysterical words, but calm, focused, honest words. And Donald had listened, and now here she was with this phone, and a pack of Camels, and two weeks' pay in her pocket. What she would do when it was time to pay back the advance was something she was going to worry about later. For now, she was going to sit here and wait for the phone to ring. Will was out there somewhere—she could practically feel his presence—and he would find a way to call again. Her job was to be here, ready to answer, when he did.

Hopper stood on the edge of the quarry, looking down into the blue water. If he was a betting man ... well, this was where the odds were. Kid's running, he's scared, it's dark, and he loses his balance.

But he couldn't think that way, not and keep his sanity—not and have any chance of helping Joyce keep hers. That phone call, now. The kid's breathing? That wasn't much to go on. It wasn't anything, in

fact, except a hysterical mother hearing what she wanted to hear. But she hadn't been wrong, either—in her shoes, he would have thought he knew Sara's breathing, and he would have challenged anyone who told him he didn't. He cringed even now at some of the things he had insisted were true after she died, like telling Diane that he could hear her calling him in the middle of the night, going out into the cold to look for her. So he understood where Joyce was, but he was also afraid to let her go any further, afraid to lose her entirely. While he had shut Powell down when he'd said she had been only a few steps from the edge already, there was some truth to it. Thin as she was, stressed as she was, scared as she was, how much more could she take?

No, he said to himself, stepping back from the quarry. He wasn't going to think of her son being down there until there was literally not a rock left in Hawkins that he hadn't looked under. He owed Joyce that. Hell, he owed Will that.

Jonathan came tearing home in a mood, slamming the door behind him. Joyce stood up, her heart pounding with hope. She hadn't believed Lonnie was involved, but that would be so simple, it would be so easy for everything to go back to normal ...

But a look at Jonathan's face confirmed what she had already known. "He wasn't there."

"No. And the asshole—"

"Jonathan. He's your father."

"He's an asshole!"

Joyce couldn't argue too much with that.

"I'm getting my camera, I'm going to go look for ... something. Anything."

"What do you think you're going to find at this hour?"

Jonathan turned and looked at her, at the phone she was clutching to her stomach. "I have to do something, Mom. I'm going crazy thinking

about him out there, lost, cold, scared ... I have to do something."

"I know."

She didn't say anything else, even the reminders to be careful, to take something to eat, to remember extra film, that she might have called after him in normal circumstances. She just sank back into the chair and held the phone a little closer.

Finding Benny this afternoon, that had been— Well, there was a reason he wasn't a big city cop anymore, and it wasn't just Sara. Looking down at the body, Hopper had thought about late night burgers and a man who sat across the table and talked to him about fishing, even when he wasn't coherent enough to form words. Benny had been one of the good guys, always there when you needed him, free food, money, whatever anyone needed from him. The idea that he might have killed himself was incomprehensible to Hopper. It had been incomprehensible to Benny's dad, who should have been looking forward to a good decade's worth of fishing trips with his son and now had nothing.

The only thing that had come of it was Benny's dad's report of a kid at the restaurant, a kid with a shaved head who might have been Will Byers. The ID had been doubtful, but it hadn't been a no, which was a hell of a lot more than Hopper had had to go on before.

And the teacher had found some piece of cloth in a storm drain leading into Hawkins National Lab. It didn't seem possible a kid could, or would, crawl in there ... but if the kid had been afraid, and it seemed like he must have been, what with the left-behind bike and the half-loaded shotgun at his house. It was a lot of running in the middle of the night, but fear was a good motivator.

"Hey. Jim. I'm still here." The voice was soft and amused. He had been hoping Cynthia would take his mind off things, because God knew he needed to stop thinking for a good long while, but he kept drifting away, lost in thought, trying to work through the tangles and find the answer to who shot Benny and where the kid was and why the hell he was here in Hawkins ...

"Sorry," he muttered, and pulled her close, kissing her hard. She responded eagerly, and he lifted her off her feet and half-carried her to the bedroom. That round, and a few beers, and another round later, stopped the thoughts for a while ... but sure enough, here he was lying awake again while Cynthia slept the peaceful sleep of someone who wasn't a police officer. Sometimes Hopper thought how nice it would have been to be a truck driver. Or a mailman. Or a liquor store clerk. But who was he kidding? He had never been able to imagine himself as anything but a cop. And usually he was good at it.

Stifling a frustrated growl so as not to wake Cynthia, he got out of bed, pulling on his pants and shirt, and stood by the lake for a long time, drinking beer and listening to the crickets and the frogs and the other nightlife. They had their shit together out there, lucky ducks.

Cynthia woke up eventually and came out, wearing nothing but his corduroy overshirt. "What are you doing? It's freezing."

He turned to her, wanting to put his arms around her, wanting to ... wanting, just once, for a woman to be something more than sex to him. Without knowing he was going to, he said, "You ever feel cursed?"

She didn't answer. Didn't know what to answer.

So he explained. "You know, the last person to go missing here was in the summer of '23. Last suicide was the fall of '61."

Cynthia stared up at him, still not sure what to say, but sure she wasn't going to indulge his morbid belief that he had somehow brought all this on just by being here. Eventually she took his hands and got up on tiptoes. "What about the last person to freeze to death?" she asked, smiling a little, hoping for a smile back. But Hopper was fresh out of smiles. When he didn't respond, she let her smile fade. "Hey. Come back inside. Warm me up."

It was a nice offer, but ... he couldn't. Not tonight. Maybe not ever again. She was a nice woman—too nice for someone like him—but she didn't understand him, and she probably never would. "Just give me a minute out here," he told her, but what he meant was that he

was going to stay out here until she fell asleep and probably until the sun came up and a new day brought the same problems back for him to solve.

And from the look on her face, she knew it, too. He wished he cared more.

But he cared about Benny. He wanted to know who had killed his friend. And he cared about Will, for the kid's own sake and for Joyce's and for Sara's, and he needed to find some trace of the kid. So tomorrow he would be a cop again, a real one, and he would get some answers.

10. Should I Stay or Should I Go

Thank you for reading!

"Should I Stay or Should I Go?"

Should I stay or should I go now?

If I stay there will be trouble

If I go there will be double

So ya gotta let me know

Should I stay or should I go?

- The Clash

The ringing of the phone beneath her fingers woke Joyce from a fitful sleep. She had the handset in her hand before she had fully awakened and remembered why she was sitting here by the phone—but by the time she had said "hello" and heard the faint breathing on the other end of the line, it had all come back to her in its awful clarity.

She couldn't stay seated. Rising to her feet, she cradled the phone in both hands. "Hello! Who is this? Who—?"

The person on the other end drew in a deep, shuddering breath, like a child crying. Like her child crying. Could she ever forget holding Will when he was a baby, a toddler, a small boy, crying in her arms, hearing that shuddering sigh as he tried to get hold of himself? This was Will. She knew it as well as she knew herself.

"Will?"

More breathing.

"Will, it's me." She was on the verge of tears herself, trying to hold it together and be calm for him. "Talk to me. I'm here! Just—just—just tell me where you are, honey. I can hear you. Please!"

"Mom?" His voice sounded as though it was coming from far away.

Joyce gasped at the sound and the lights flickered, as though they were as happy to hear from him as she was. "Will! Yes, it's—it's me. Yes!" She held the phone closer, tighter, as if it were Will she was holding. "Where are you? Where are you? Just talk to me!"

And then lightning arced from the phone, crackling across her fingers, and she screamed and dropped the handset instinctively, jumping back, only then realizing that the phone, her one precious slender connection to her missing boy, was fried. Again. And there had been no storm to blame it on this time.

Joyce knelt, picking up the handset, sobbing incoherently as she pounded on the little plastic reset buttons on the phone's base, holding the handset to her ear as she cried out "No!" over and over again and strained to hear something, anything, on the other line.

All her strength left her. She collapsed next to the chair, against the dead phone, weeping, feeling more helpless than she ever had before.

Damned phone! She was just about to get Will to say where he was! Just about to know where her boy was, to be able to get him. She shrieked aloud, picking up the whole heavy piece of plastic and heaving it away from her, tearing it from the wall, and then sat there weeping and screaming and generally having a tantrum that even Jonathan on his best—worst—day as a toddler couldn't have matched.

As she sat there, shouting out her pain and her anger and her fear, the lights flickered again. And then again. She looked up, then, realizing that only the lights in the hallway were flickering. Two bulbs in the sconce, so unless they were both about to burn out, it couldn't be the bulbs. Was there something wrong with the wiring?

Curiosity got the better of her tantrum, and she got to her feet, investigating, standing beneath the lights as they continued to flicker.

"Jonathan?" she cried weakly, even though she knew he wasn't there. No one was there. No one could be frying her phone or making her lights flicker. As she moved down the hall, they flickered again, and

again. And then they stopped, and the second set of lights, farther down the hall, did it, while the first set stayed normal. "What?" she muttered, trying to catch her breath, to stop crying long enough to figure out what was going on.

The lamp on the small table outside her room flickered now. Twice. Then one quick blink.

And from Will's room, the sound of that song he liked, the one Jonathan had introduced him to, blasted out. Joyce shrieked in surprise and fear, plastering herself back against the wall. What, who, was in her house?

Under the closed door, she saw lights flickering inside the room, and the song kept playing.

From fear she moved into anger. If this was someone's idea of a sick joke, if someone was here playing pranks on her while her boy was missing, she was going to make them very sorry. With a determined effort, she pushed herself off the wall, tiptoeing hesitantly across the hall with her hand stretched out, trembling, reaching for the doorknob. Inside Will's room, the song kept playing.

The hallway had never seemed so wide. Finally, her hand was on the knob. She opened the door and stepped in, finding—no one. No one was there. The tape player on Will's desk was playing by itself. It had turned itself on.

How did that happen? Outside of horror movies, this kind of thing just didn't happen.

As she stood there, losing her anger and descending into sadness, the light by the window blinked. It blinked again as she moved toward it. Joyce put both hands on the lampshade, holding the lamp, staring down at the flickering bulb. What did this mean?

"Will, is that you?" The question came from somewhere inside her. Who else would be in his room?

As if in answer to the question, the lightbulb burned more brightly, nearly blinding her as she stared down at it. It was impossible that

any lightbulb could shine this brightly.

And then it stopped, blinking off entirely, and the music stopped. And ... the wall began to buckle inward.

As Joyce stared at it in horrified fascination, she realized that some ... thing was pushing it. A rounded something, pressing against the inside of the wall, stretching the paint in ways Joyce wouldn't have imagined it could stretch. There were ridges, now, and something that looked like fingers. Big fingers. Almost like claws.

She screamed in terror and ran, getting herself out of the house as fast as she could. She made it to the car, finding the extra keys she kept on the visor, turning it on, before she heard the song again, that "should I stay or should I go" song. The lights were blinking in Will's room again.

Joyce stared at them. That was Will. She was absolutely sure of it. Somehow Will was making the lights blink and the music play. But it hadn't been Will coming through the wall. That had been something else, something—something that chased Will away, she thought, remembering how the lights and the music had turned off just before the wall had bulged.

She should get away. She should run.

But if she ran, how would she help Will? She had promised her boys she would be there for them, and God help her, she had failed them more often than she should have. And tonight, she was not going to fail Will, not when he needed her.

Joyce turned the car off and got out, moving slowly back toward the house, wavering between fear and determination, as the music played into the quiet night.

Morning found her still in Will's room. She had been awake all night, unable to tear her eyes away from the lights, her precious connection to her missing boy. She'd brought every lamp in the house into the room, watching them and asking questions when they blinked. Will wasn't able to stay in the lights long enough to tell her anything substantive, though, so it was more that tenuous connection than

anything else.

She didn't know when Jonathan had come home last night, and she felt vaguely guilty about that. When they found Will, she would make it up to him.

Hunched over at the end of Will's bed, staring at the lamps, she was waiting for another reappearance when Jonathan opened the door and called to her. She brought him over to the bed, holding onto his hand. "It's Will. It's Will. He's trying to talk to me."

"He's trying to talk to you," Jonathan repeated, trying to wrap his head around the idea. Joyce understood—it was hard to believe.

"Through the lights," she confirmed.

"Mom."

"I know. I know," she told him. She really did know how this would look, and sound, especially coming from her. If she was Karen Wheeler, now, people would still think she'd gone off the deep end, but it wouldn't be quite the same. "Just—just watch." Turning to the lights, she said, "Will, your brother's here. Can you show him what you showed me, baby?"

As they waited, one of the bulbs flickered.

Joyce gasped and pointed at it. "Did you see that?"

"It's the electricity, Mom! It's acting up, it's the same thing that fried the phone!"

"No, it is not the electricity, Jonathan!" Nothing would make the electricity flicker as specifically as what she'd seen. "Something is going on here!" She pointed to the wall where the thing had tried to come through. "Yesterday, the wall—"

"What about the wall?" Jonathan shouted. He was worried about her and scared for his brother, she knew he was, and he was so used to being the voice of logic and reason, he couldn't help but be skeptical now.

"I don't know, I don't know!"

"First the lights, then the wall?"

"I just know that Will is here."

Tears were welling up in Jonathan's eyes, and she hated that he had to be scared for her sanity. "No, Mom."

Where was Will? Had something happened? Joyce looked around the room, getting to her feet as she thought it through. "Maybe if I put more lamps out—"

Jonathan got up, too, cradling her face in his hands. "No, Mom, you don't need more lamps! You need to stop this! Okay? He's just lost. People are looking for him. They're going to find him."

Yes. That made sense. They would find him. Joyce nodded, a wave of weariness crashing over her. She sank back onto the bed, her legs unable to hold her.

Jonathan's hand was on her back, reassuring. He had always been there, so dependable. "Can you do me a favor, Mom? Can you just try and get some sleep? Can you do that for me?"

She nodded. "I promise." He didn't need to have to worry about her on top of everything else.

He went to the kitchen to make breakfast, and she told herself sternly that she would eat it, no matter how little she might want food right now.

Left alone, she looked around at the lights. Jonathan was right, as far as he knew, but she was right, too, as far as she knew. Could she give up on what she knew just because it seemed so unbelievable?

She managed to eat enough to satisfy Jonathan, who gave her a long hug before he left. "Now, you're going to get some sleep?"

"Yes. Are you going to be okay at school?"

He shrugged. "Am I ever?" It was a familiar refrain—Jonathan had

always hated school, feeling like it was a waste of time when he could be doing more important things. Then he smiled and cupped her cheek with his hand. "I'll be fine."

"Okay."

Joyce watched him go. Then she turned back into the house, thinking she probably should get some sleep. But what if Will tried to make contact? She should be ready.

In the garage, she found the box of Christmas lights, and started tacking them up around the living room. But there weren't enough, so she left the house, lingering in the doorway long enough to assure Will she would be right back, and drove into town, where she convinced Donald to advance her enough for a new phone and quite a few boxes of Christmas lights.

When she was done, the house looked beautiful. Like fairyland. Lights were draped back and forth across the ceiling, shining brightly. "Okay, Will," she whispered to herself. "Any time now."

But nothing happened, except the startling sound of a knock on the door. Karen Wheeler sure could pick her times, Joyce thought, forcing a smile as she opened the door. She liked Mike's mom, of course she did, but they had nothing in common. Although at least Karen had never made Joyce feel judged, like some of the other moms had over the years. Karen seemed to accept that Joyce's life was different, and not to think much about her beyond that, which was just fine with Joyce.

While the oven preheated for the casserole Karen had brought, Joyce tried to explain the lights as a way to make it feel like Will was coming home, that the house would be ready and decorated for Christmas. But what she really wanted was for Karen to leave so Will would come back. Instinctively, Joyce was sure if anyone would see the lights, it wouldn't be Karen Wheeler. She meant well, but she didn't have the imagination to believe the impossible.

At the end of the visit, Karen's toddler, Holly, had gone off exploring in Will's room. Joyce was convinced Will had been there and Holly had seen the lights, so she rushed Karen out the door, turning around

and leaning against it with a sigh.

"I'm here, baby," she told the lights. "Talk to me."

And then it happened. One string of lights lit up, in order, again and again, pointing to a particular place in the wall. Joyce followed them, pushing the bookcase away from the wall and opening the large built-in cupboard, which was where the lights seemed to be pointing.

But there was nothing there, no lights. How could she talk to him?

There had been one bundle of lights left. She grabbed it, plugging it in, and climbed into the cabinet with the ball of lights in her lap. "Will," she whispered to it. "Are you here?"

The lights lit up with a bright white glow, and she gasped in delight, cradling them as though they really were Will.

"Okay. Good, good, good. Blink once for yes, twice for no. Can you do that for me, sweetie?"

The lights lit and faded.

She patted them. "Good! Good boy." Being so close to him, feeling him as though he was here with her, was almost more than she could bear, but she had to hold up, for Will. "Baby, I need to know, are you alive?"

One blink. The relief was overwhelming. If he was alive, she could help him. She could do anything.

"Are you safe?"

Two blinks. Which shouldn't have surprised her, but she had wanted so badly to be reassured.

Gripping the lights, she said urgently, "I need to know where to find you, where are you, can you tell me where you are? Can you—" How could he tell her, with one blink for yes and two for no? But he had to tell her, somehow. "Please, baby. I need to find you, tell me what to do. Please."

The lights were silent, Will as uncertain how to communicate what was important as she was.

For a moment, the fear and frustration overwhelmed her. Then she shook the lights a little. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

In the shed, she found a can of paint, and on the wall she painted the alphabet, hanging lights so that each bulb matched up with a letter. Standing back, she was proud of what she'd done. One way or another, she was going to communicate with her son.

"Okay," she said aloud to the room, sure that Will could hear her. "Okay, baby, talk to me. Talk to me, where are you?"

The letters lit up, one at a time. R. I. G. H. T. H. E. R. E.

"Right here. Right here? I don't know what that means. I—I need you to tell me what to do. What should I do? How do I get to you? How do I find you? What should I do?"

The letters lit up again, the message crystal clear. R.U.N.

Behind her, the wall bulged, the same shape as before, and the lights went crazy. Joyce stared at it in horror, frozen to the spot. What was it? Was this what kept Will from being safe? A claw of some kind ripped through the wallpaper, a long white skeletal arm covered in some kind of glistening skin reached out, and a whole creature followed it, humanoid but not. A monster. A real-life movie monster, here in Hawkins, Indiana.

The reality of what she was seeing broke Joyce out of her trance, and she did what Will had told her to do. She ran.

Outside the house, Jonathan was just pulling up. In her terror, Joyce ran in front of his car. He got out, coming to her, and they held each other, even as approaching lights and sirens lit up the night.

11. Words

Thank you for reading!

"Words"

You look at me as if you're in a daze

It's like the feeling at the end of the page

When you realize you don't know what you just read

- *Missing Persons*

It had been such a good day, Hopper thought. Such a good day, in a long damned streak of bad ones. Talking his way into that facility, catching them in the lie about the tapes, finding out all the back story on the microfiche ... he'd felt like a real cop again. Like Detective Jim Hopper, two steps ahead at all times. It had been awkward seeing Marissa again at the library, but it was always going to be awkward seeing her again.

He'd been prepared to go to Joyce and tell her progress was being made, that he had reason to believe they were moving forward, and to deal with whatever emotions that news brought up.

But now—now he was driving away from the quarry, where they'd pulled that poor kid's body out of the water. He'd had a bad feeling about the place from the start, the chill in his gut he always got when he was in the most obvious, and therefore most likely, place. Nothing strange, nothing sinister, just a poor damned kid who got scared and lost his footing and ruined his mother's life.

The very last place he wanted to go right now was to Joyce's house, to watch her break when he told her that her son was dead. But he didn't have any other choice. It had to be him. He couldn't bear for her to hear the news from anyone else.

She met him first, before he could get the words out. "Hop, there was something in my house. It came out of the wall. It—it was a thing, a

monster. You have to go in there, you have to get it out."

He drew in a breath to tell her anyway, but he couldn't. Not yet. "All right. Let me look." He gestured to Powell, and they went in, guns drawn, neither of them surprised to find that there was nothing there.

The house was—he didn't understand what was going on in the house. There were Christmas lights strung everywhere, all over the ceilings, and a string on the wall with the alphabet painted under them. What had she been doing to herself? He was willing to bet she hadn't slept since Will had gone missing, and had only eaten when someone forced food on her. She couldn't keep on like this. He wanted to hold her the way he had in high school, all those years ago, to take care of her. But he couldn't do that. He was the Chief of Police, and instead of making things better, he had to make them so much worse.

He brought her inside, with Jonathan. Joyce went immediately to the wall, putting her hand on the smoothness of the wallpaper, frowning at it.

"Joyce. Joyce!"

"What?" She came toward him, but turned her head so she could stare at the wall, puzzled and worried about it far more than she was about what he had come to tell her. And he couldn't put it off anymore.

"Joyce. We found— We found something."

She nodded vaguely, but wasn't listening.

"We found Will, Joyce. In the quarry."

Behind him, he heard a sharp gasp from Jonathan.

Joyce didn't look at either of them. "No." She said it as though she was distracted, as though she hadn't heard him.

Gently, Hopper kept trying to reach her. "We think ... well, our working theory right now is that he crashed the bike, made his way to the quarry, and accidentally fell in."

Joyce was staring at the smooth, unblemished wallpaper. He wasn't sure she could even hear him, and he was terrified that they were going to lose her to this, that she was going to go under with the weight of her grief.

"The earth must have given way," he went on. She moved her head a little, but then continued staring at the wall. "Joyce." He said it again when she didn't respond. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"No." She looked at him, clearly shaken, but not by his news. "Whoever you found, is not my boy. It's not Will."

He had seen this before, this denial in the face of the facts. He had pretended Sara was just in the other room for ... far longer than he should have.

"Joyce."

"No. You—you don't understand. I talked to him. A half hour ago." She went to the wall and opened up a cupboard, lifting a bundle of Christmas lights out of it. "He was—he was here. He was talking, with these."

"Talking?" Hopper echoed. Well, that explained the lights. It hurt to see her like this—she'd always been so smart, even if she had never believed it about herself. But this kind of thing had always been a possibility, hovering just out of sight.

"Uh-huh. One blink for yes, two for no." She put the bundle back in the cupboard, going to the alphabet wall. "And—and then I made this so, so he could talk to me. Because—" She pointed at the cupboard. "He was hiding. From—that thing."

"The thing that came out of the wall, the thing that chased you."

She didn't catch that he was humoring her, or that he didn't believe her. "Yeah."

Jonathan came toward her, holding his arms out to her. "Mom, come on, please, please."

"No. It—he's—it's after him! He's in danger." She let go of Jonathan

and turned to Hopper, holding his arms. "We have to find him! We—"

"What exactly was this thing? Some kind of animal, you said?"

"No, it was this—it was almost human, but it wasn't. It had these long arms and it didn't have a face." She was animated in her description, her hands moving as she tried to get the picture across, and there was no doubt in Hopper's mind that to Joyce, this thing was very real, as if she had actually seen it.

Jonathan turned away, leaving the room entirely. Hopper felt for the kid. It was hard enough to lose your brother, but now it looked like he might lose his mom, too.

"It didn't have a face," Hopper repeated, gently. He took her by the arms, moving her toward the table in front of the couch, coaxing her to sit. "Joyce." She was talking incoherently now, starting to weep, and Jim knelt in front of her. "Listen. Listen to me." He hadn't spoken of this before, not to anyone. Not even really to Diane, although she'd known what was happening. But Joyce needed to hear it, before she lost her other son, too. "After Sara, I saw her, too. And I heard her." He still could, if he tried hard enough. Or, late at night, if he didn't try hard enough not to. "I didn't know what was real. And then I figured out that it was in my mind, and I had to pack all that away, otherwise I was going to fall down a hole that I couldn't get out of."

He thought maybe he'd gotten through to her, as her body stopped trembling and she got control of the tears, but she shook her head, saying, "You're talking about grief. This is different."

"I'm just sayin'."

"I know what you're saying, Hop. And I swear to you, I know what I saw. And—I'm not crazy—"

Hopper kept his voice low and calm and soft. "I'm not saying that you're crazy."

She wasn't having any of that. "No. You are. And I—I understand. But ... God ..." She was losing the fight with the tears again, her hands trembling in his. "I need you to believe me. Please."

He couldn't. What she was saying— He had seen her son's body with his own eyes, and here she was talking about him being in the lights. Much as he wanted to be on her side, to be the person who believed her, he just couldn't. "Listen. I think you should go down to the morgue tomorrow and see it for yourself and get the answers that you need." She didn't say yes, but she didn't say no, either, which was better than he'd thought that suggestion would go. He held her hands a little tighter. "But tonight, I want you to try to get some sleep, if you can."

Joyce looked at him like he was the one who was crazy, closing her eyes and shaking her head like she couldn't believe what she was hearing—or like she could believe it, and was incredibly disappointed. He wished with all his heart that he didn't have to be the one to bring her back to reality—but better him than Jonathan.

With a final squeeze of her hand, Hopper got to his feet. He went outside and got in his car and turned it on, ready to drive away, then turned it off again. How could he leave her there like this? Couldn't he go back, and pretend to believe her long enough to get her to sleep, to hold her and tuck her in and make sure she was okay, at least for tonight?

But he couldn't do that. She wouldn't want him to, anyway—nothing he had said had convinced her. Tomorrow, in the daylight, maybe she would see then. He leaned back in the truck, pulling his hat down over his eyes. When she woke up, he would be here, and when she went to the morgue, he would be there. It was the best he could do.

Left alone, Joyce went back to the wall. She couldn't understand how every trace of that creature could have disappeared, how the wall could be so smooth when she had seen the paper tear as that thing pushed its way through. If only she had stayed, and ... and killed it, somehow. Then Will would be safe.

Jonathan had retreated to his room, and she went to his door, ready to knock, to ask for his help or try to offer hers, and thought better of it. He needed time alone. He always had, since he was little. He worked through things on his own best. She could talk to him in the morning.

Briefly, she considered doing as Hopper had asked and getting some sleep—but what if Will came back? If that thing came back? She needed to be ready.

From the shed, she got the axe, bringing it back inside with her. Then she sat down on the couch, the axe in her hands, ready to save her boy if there was the slightest chance to do it.

12. I Go Crazy

Thank you for reading!

"I Go Crazy"

I see your face and it just ain't true

No, it just ain't true

- Paul Davis

Joyce woke on the couch, the axe on her lap, sure that she had heard Will's voice. She looked around, dazed, blinked, and must have dozed off again, because Will was suddenly there in front of her, shouting "Mom!" She gasped, blinked again, and Will became Jonathan, who was bending over her, trying to shake her awake.

"What? What time is it?"

"It's almost eight. We have to go."

Still half-asleep, she couldn't remember why. "Where?" she asked him. "Where?"

"To see Will. To the morgue."

"Will isn't at the morgue," she said automatically.

"Mom, please don't start that again. I need you to— I need you. Please."

Jonathan so rarely asked for anything, and almost never said he needed anything. For him, she would make an effort.

"Let me get my teeth brushed. Is there any coffee?"

He looked relieved. "I'm making some."

"Thank you."

"Should I take some to the Chief?"

"The Chief?"

"Yeah, he's asleep out in his truck."

"He is?" Joyce was touched. That was the Hopper she remembered, who didn't say much but was just quietly there when you least expected him to be. "Yeah, take him some coffee. Tell him—tell him I said thanks."

Hopper followed them to the morgue. He hadn't said much to either Joyce or Jonathan this morning, feeling kind of foolish to be found asleep in his truck outside their house. He was glad neither of them had felt the need to make a big deal out of it.

At the morgue, both of them were ushered into the back, but Hopper was not asked to join them. Which was fine by him. He'd only seen the kid alive once, and he'd seen him dead once, and that was enough. More than enough. He wished he could be there for Joyce when she had to face the truth, but he'd be right outside, where he could rush in if he was needed.

He sat there for what felt like forever, turning his hat around in his hands, waiting. And waiting. At last he asked Patty, the receptionist, what was taking so long.

She gave the long-suffering sigh of the only competent person in an office full of chaos. "Well, everything's been a bit chaotic around here without Gary."

"Without Gary?" Hopper echoed. "Where's Gary?" Gary hadn't missed a day of work in all the time Hopper had been on the job here. Why would he be off today, of all days?

Patty frowned at him. "I thought you know. Those men from State, they sent Gary home last night."

"So who did the autopsy?"

"Someone from State."

Why the hell would someone from State come to Hawkins to autopsy a little kid who fell in a quarry? That didn't make any sense at all. On the whole, Hopper was relieved to have something to puzzle over, but he was sure in the end it would be nothing. A paperwork issue, some overzealous bureaucrat who liked little kids' autopsies done with extra red tape.

Back in the bowels of the morgue, Joyce and Jonathan stood in front of a window, looking into a room where a form draped in a blue sheet lay on a stretcher. Jonathan was holding himself together, but barely. Joyce ... wasn't sure what to think. This must look like Will, or Hopper would never have told her that it was. And if it wasn't Will, and it looked like him, then why? How? But it couldn't be Will, because he was at home, somehow. Right here, like he had told her.

Still, the anticipation of the moment that sheet would be pulled back and she would have to see the face of a dead child who looked like her boy was making it hard to breathe.

Jonathan looked at her, then at the morgue attendant, and gave him the smallest of nods. The attendant pulled back the sheet. Next to her, Jonathan trembled when the face was revealed, the face that looked remarkably like Will's. Jonathan bolted off somewhere to be sick, but Joyce stayed where she was. How could this boy look so much like Will and not be Will?

To the attendant, she said, "He has a birthmark on his right arm. Can you show that to me, please?"

The attendant moved the sheet. The mark was there. It was ... Will's. Just as she had seen it thousands of times. Just as she had traced her fingers over when he was a baby.

How could she be standing here looking at this body, this body that looked like Will in every detail, and be certain that it wasn't him? Because she was certain. She was absolutely sure. If that made her crazy, so be it, but she wasn't going to let Will down by ignoring what she felt.

Jonathan hadn't been able to bear going back in, so he'd come out and was now sitting next to Hopper, both waiting. The kid was holding himself together pretty well, but you could tell it had hit him hard. Living out there, the three of them, big age difference between the two boys, Joyce being who she was—Jonathan probably felt responsible. Hopper felt for him, poor kid.

"How's your mom doing?" he asked.

The kid had to think that one over. Either he wasn't sure what to say or he wasn't sure how she was doing—or he was sure and didn't want to say it out loud. "I don't know," he muttered at last.

Behind the desk a phone rang.

"How long's that stuff been goin' on, with the lights and Will and the thing in the wall?"

Jonathan shook his head. "Since the first phone call, I guess."

Classic denial. Poor Joyce.

"You know, she's had anxiety problems, in the past," Jonathan said. "But this? ... I don't know."

Hopper sensed that it was rare for the kid to offer so much, and to a virtual stranger, at that. He must be really worried about her. Hell, Hopper was really worried about her. He was on the verge of getting up and going back there to see if she had collapsed or if she was still spouting delusional fairytales.

Next to him, Jonathan sighed heavily. "I'm worried it could be ... I don't know." He took a deep breath, getting himself together, and made eye contact with Hopper for the first time. "She'll be okay. We'll be okay."

Hopper couldn't tell which one of them the kid was trying to convince.

"My mom ... she's tough."

The kid didn't know the half of it. "Yeah, she is." Hopper reached out

and put a hand on Jonathan's shoulder. "Hey. She is." This time, he didn't know which of them he was trying to convince.

Jonathan gave him a little smile, though, so Hopper figured at least one of them felt better. Actually, come to think of it, he did, too. Maybe Joyce was talking to the lights, but she would come through it. He believed that. He would help her as much as he can. For the first time, he thought maybe it was a good thing he had come to Hawkins rather than going somewhere, anywhere, else.

They were still smiling at each other, Hopper squeezing Jonathan's shoulder, when they heard a voice yelling, "Ma'am! Ma'am." The door swung violently open, and Joyce emerged, followed closely by the morgue technician, who was brandishing a clipboard and demanding that she sign it.

Joyce turned to him, yelling, "I don't know what you think that thing is in there, but that is not my son."

Hopper was on his feet, looking concerned. "Joyce. Wait a second."

"No!" She wasn't staying in here one more minute. She pushed through the doors, heedless of Jonathan calling her name and completely ignoring the technician and his damned clipboard.

Jonathan hurried out after Joyce, leaving Hopper standing there. He turned to the technician. "What was that all about?"

"She—she needs to sign the forms! But she insists that isn't her son, and that she's not going to sign. We can't release the body without a parent's signature, so now what do we do?" the technician demanded, staring at Hopper as though he had the answers.

"Wait, all right? She just lost her child. Have some compassion."

The technician took a breath, getting his temper under control with obvious effort. "All right. She has twenty-four hours."

"I'll tell her."

"Good luck." With that, the technician headed back into the lab. Hopper hoped he liked spending time around the dead, because he

certainly didn't seem equipped to handle the living.

Joyce had taken off from the morgue, walking down the street, needing to get away from there and from Hopper and from Jonathan and get somewhere that she could clear her head.

Jonathan followed her in the car, demanding that she get in. He didn't understand. She wasn't sure she understood well enough to explain it to him. She waved him off. "I need to think. Just go on home."

"Mom, will you just get in, please?"

She waved him off, hurrying down the sidewalk. Jonathan pulled the car to a stop and came after her, catching up just after she had crossed the street. He put his hand on her shoulder and turned her around.

"Stop!"

"Just go home, Jonathan!"

"No. This is not an okay time for you to shut down."

"Shut down?" Was that what he thought this was? Did he not see there was more to this than met the eye?

"We have to deal with this, Mom! We have to deal with the funeral!"

She hated to have to argue with Jonathan. He didn't deserve it. But she was damned well not going to have anything more to do with that thing they'd shown her. "The funeral?" she asked him in disbelief. "For—for who? For that thing back there?"

"Let me get this straight. Will. That's not his body, because he's in the lights, right? And there's a monster in the wall. Do you even hear yourself?"

Did he imagine she didn't? Did he think she thought this was all perfectly normal? "I know it sounds crazy. *I sound crazy.*"

"Yeah!"

"Do you think I don't know that? It *is* crazy! But I heard him, Jonathan, he talked to me! Will is, is calling to me, and he's out there, and he's alone, and he's scared, and, and I don't care if anyone believes me! I'm not going to stop looking for him until I find him and bring him home!"

Jonathan's eyes had filled with tears. She hated to hurt him—but she couldn't abandon Will, not even for him. Her son was out there somewhere, not back in that room, and she would fight anyone who told her otherwise, even Jonathan, her rock.

"I am going to bring him home!" she shouted at him, one more time, for emphasis. And then she turned and walked away, because she needed to think now, more than ever.

"Yeah, well, while you're talking to the lights, the rest of us are having a funeral for Will! I'm not letting him stay in that freezer another day!"

Under any other circumstances, Joyce would have been proud of him—he was doing exactly what she was doing, the very best he could for Will. Today, he was just another obstacle in her way as she tried to figure out how to get to Will.

13. One Way or Another

Thank you for reading!

One way or another, I'm gonna find ya

- Blondie

Joyce went straight home to wait, calling for Will. In order to boost the strength of her own voice, wearied now from days of crying, her throat sore and dry, she brought Will's boombox into the living room, playing his song for him in order to call him to her.

"Come on," she said, tense and impatient, pacing back and forth, unable to stop moving. "Come on!"

The song kept playing, and nothing happened, and Joyce completely lost her cool, forgetting this was her son she was waiting for, forgetting that he was hiding from some creature trying to get to him. "TALK TO ME!" she screamed. "I know you're here!"

She could feel him here—why wasn't he speaking? She tugged on the lights in various places, pacing the floor underneath them as they stayed dark and silent.

Slowly another sound intruded itself over the blare of the music, over the pounding of Joyce's heart. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* She turned the music off, listening for where the sound was coming from.

Behind her. The same part of the wall that monster had come through. The monster who was chasing her boy, who may have been the one to take her boy. Who was putting her through this nightmare.

She stood there in front of the wall. This time, if the monster came through, she wasn't running.

Then there was another sound, faint but real—not through a phone, not through the lights. Will was calling her. From somewhere on the other side of the wall, Will was calling her.

Joyce gasped, for a moment unable to believe her ears. "Will?" She put her hands on the wall, as if somehow she could touch him through it.

"Mom?" he called again. "Mom!"

"Will!" He was outside. He must be. She ran for the door, calling his name ... but there was nothing outside. No Will, no nothing. Just ... the chairs and the porch swing. Everything normal. Joyce looked around helplessly, confused and frustrated and panicked, before running back into the house.

The thumping was still coming from the wall.

"Will?!"

"Mom!" He was louder now, more strident.

"Will, I'm here!" Joyce ran her hands up and down the wall. What could she do? If he was there, how could she get to him? "I'm here!" she said again. Reaching up, she grabbed the wallpaper in both hands where it was starting to come loose at the seams and pulled, ripping a big piece of it away.

What she found was ... well, if she could have stopped to consider it, she would have vomited. It was a big pink mass, like ... meat, almost, and it was glistening. But there was no time to think about what it was, because on the other side of it she could see him. Her boy. Will. He was alive ... somewhere behind that pink stuff.

"Oh! Oh, God! Will! Baby ..." She was weeping now, unable to stop the tears from coming, patting the wall as if he could feel her through it.

On the other side of the pink wall, he looked over his shoulder at a sudden sound, and she could see the terror in his face.

"Mom, it's coming!"

"Tell me where you are! I'll protect you!"

"It's like home, but it's so dark. It's so dark and empty! And it's cold!"

Oh, Mom!" he shrieked, his fear rising.

Joyce was as scared and as confused as he was, but in this moment she knew what she had to do. She leaned closer to the wall and spoke intently. "Listen to me. I swear I'm gonna get to you, okay? But right now, I need you to hide."

"Mom!"

Something was happening to the wall. In the urgency of her message to Will, Joyce had barely noticed it, but the real wall was beginning to close in again, wallpaper and everything, as if that pink wall had never existed. There wasn't much time.

"Listen. No, no, listen, listen. I—I will find you," she promised.

Will's hands were pressed against the wall on the other side, and sending him away from her was the hardest thing she thought she had ever done—but she couldn't protect him if she couldn't get to him, and that thing was coming for him.

"Listen, I will find you. But you have to run now. Run!"

And he was gone. The hole in the wall closed, leaving only the torn paper to prove anything had ever happened.

Joyce turned and saw the axe, lifting it and chopping into the wall with all her force. If there was a way through, she was going to open it up.

But there was nothing. The only thing she saw as pieces of wall fell away under her repeated blows was the outside, the peaceful fall day a mockery of the unreal torment she was living in.

Will was gone. She couldn't feel him any longer—wherever he had run, if he had hidden, if he had been caught, she didn't know. The sense of him still here in the house that had sustained her all this time had disappeared as though it had never been at all. And wherever he was, or had been, she had no way to get to him now.

Feeling lost herself, utterly defeated, she stood there staring through the hole in her wall and wept in despair.

14. Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?

Thank you for reading!

"Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?"

You know we've got a mystery to solve,

So Scooby-Doo be ready for your act.

Don't hold back!

- Scooby-Doo, Where Are You

Something didn't sit right with Hopper about the autopsy. A local kid dies and the local coroner is sent home by some people from the state? That wasn't normal. And given Joyce's insistence ... well, maybe she was crazy, driven out of her mind with grief. But a parent's feeling for their child was something that shouldn't be ignored. All of Hopper's experience as a cop told him that, as well as his own all-too-brief fatherhood.

He had Flo call Gary to come into the station, and sat him down.
"You feeling all right, Gary?"

"Never better."

"So you're just ... taking the day off? I've never known you to take a day off."

"Not my idea, Hopper."

"You didn't call these guys?"

"No, sir. They just showed up with the body. Troopers."

"Where did they come from? Did they tell you why they were out looking around in a quarry in the middle of the night?"

"I guess one of them was doing some kind of rounds? They didn't

explain much." He shook his head. "Sure is a shame. Poor Joyce, she must be beside herself."

"It's a tough blow." Hopper didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to have to think about the pain Joyce would be in once the truth hit her—he had altogether too much experience with that kind of pain. "So, Gary, tell me about these troopers who brought in Will."

"There was about six of them, I'd say."

"All staties."

"Yes, sir. Never seen that many troopers come with a body before."

"They told you that they were going to take care of the autopsy, huh?"

"Yeah. Claimed jurisdiction, kicked me out." Gary shook his head. "Well, it all seemed a bit over the top to me, considering ..."

"Considering what?"

"Considering this was Will Byers and not ... John F. Kennedy."

Hopper sighed. Gary had a point. Why would the state have bothered? Public health issue? But if so, why wouldn't they have talked to him? He got up, moving closer to the TV. The sound was off, but the station was tuned to an interview with the statie who had found Will's body. Why a statie? Why the quarry? It didn't make sense.

Belatedly, he remembered Gary was still there. "Thanks for coming by, Gary."

"Sure thing."

As Gary got up to go, Hopper turned up the sound on the TV.

"... know that the troopers are on duty, and it should be safe, because we think this is just an isolated incident," the statie was saying.

"State Trooper David O'Bannon, thank you so much for your time."

The interview was over, but Hopper's questions were only just beginning. He decided to track down this trooper himself, which took some doing ... but Hopper had been a cop for a long time. He knew what cops did when they had found bodies, when they wanted to drown their sorrows. It was just a question of finding the right bar.

Eventually he did, taking a seat next to the trooper and ordering a whiskey and lighting up a cigarette. They sat there watching the game and drinking until O'Bannon was about done with his beer and Hopper's glass was down to the dregs. He pushed it across the bar and wiggled his fingers at the bartender. "Another, please." He pretended he had just noticed O'Bannon's beer getting low. "And another for my, uh, friend here."

O'Bannon looked at him in surprise. "Oh, thanks, man. 'Preciate it."

"Yeah, that's all right. I'm, uh, I'm celebratin'. My daughter. She won the spelling bee today." God, where had that come from? Sara would never win any damned spelling bees, although she could have. She'd been so goddamned smart. He leaned into it, finding an obscure pleasure in being, for just a moment, a man whose daughter was alive to win spelling bees.

Seeming unimpressed, O'Bannon said, "Is that right." He turned his attention back to the game.

"Yeah, that's right. 'Odontalgia.' That was the word. You know what it means?" O'Bannon shook his head. He didn't particularly care what it meant, but that wasn't going to stop Hopper from telling him. "It's a fancy name for a toothache." Hopper chuckled to himself. "Yeah, she's smart. She's real smart." Will Byers was smart; Hopper bet he could spell odontalgia. "I don't know where she gets it from, I've been trying to figure that out for years."

"Your daughter, she got a name?" O'Bannon asked.

Coming in the middle of his assumption of this proud father persona, the question threw Hopper off. "What?"

"Your daughter. What's her name?"

He hadn't wanted to give away that part, had wanted to keep it for himself. Reluctantly, he said, "Sara. Her name's Sara."

O'Bannon reached for the full beer bottle the bartender had put in front of him, and lifted it. "To Sara."

Hopper toasted him with his own refilled glass, and they drank. The hook was set. Giving it a moment, he looked over at his companion. "I recognize you. You famous or somethin'?"

"You might've seen me on TV. I, uh, I found that Byers boy."

Wasn't sitting well with him, either. O'Bannon's eyes were on the TV, and he looked fidgety, nervous. Not sad or proud or even matter-of-fact. Yeah, something wasn't right here.

"Were you on that case, or what?"

"No, I just saw him on patrol, you know. Dumb luck."

"So that quarry, that's, uh ... that's state-run, where they found the boy, huh," Hopper said slowly. He tapped the ash off his cigarette, carefully not looking at O'Bannon.

"Yeah."

There was silence for a moment, while Hopper could feel how badly O'Bannon wanted him to drop the subject. "Well, that's funny. 'Cause, you know, I know for a fact that it's run by the Sattler Company." He did look over now, waiting to see what the reaction would be. "Frank Sattler, decent guy, still got a couple of operational quarries up in Rohan."

"That right."

"Yeah. That's right." Hopper's tone was flat, now; direct. "So why you lying to me, man?"

O'Bannon looked at him, angry enough to try to deflect Hopper confrontationally. "What's your problem, bud?"

"I don't have a problem. I'm just a concerned citizen."

"Yeah? Well, stick your nose someplace else. The kid is dead. End of story." Getting up, O'Bannon threw some money on the bar and grabbed his jacket. "Thanks for ruining the game, dick."

And he walked off.

Hopper was struck by what he'd said. 'The kid is dead.' Had there been any doubt? Hopper had asked about the quarry, not about the kid. To offer up a defensive assertion that the kid was dead meant that ... maybe the kid wasn't dead. How could that be, if there was a body? Had Joyce been right all along with her 'Will's in the lights' theory?

He couldn't get into whether Will was in the lights right now, but he could follow up on this lead. He finished his drink—no use wasting good whiskey—and, tossing some money of his own on the bar, he followed O'Bannon out the door.

Catching the trooper on his way to the parking lot behind the bar, Hopper grabbed him by the arm. "Tell me about the quarry. How did you know to go there?"

"Go to hell."

So Hopper slugged him. "The quarry! Who sent you there?"

O'Bannon just glared at him, so Hopper hit him some more, backing him up against the wall. It felt damn good to finally be able to do something, to work out some of his frustrations. Hopper was careful not to let it go too far—he did need information out of this asshole, after all. When O'Bannon was sagging against the wall, his breath coming short, Hopper hauled him up and held him still with a hand on his jaw.

"Okay, let's try this one more time. Who told you to be out there? What were you doing out there?"

The trooper shook his head just slightly. Couldn't talk, wouldn't talk, was scared to talk—it was all the same to Hopper. He raised his fist again, making it clear he would strike again and again until he got an

answer.

O'Bannon groaned a "no" at him, having had enough, apparently. "He—he just told me to call it in, and not let anybody get too close."

"Get close to what?"

"The body."

Hopper froze. Joyce had been right. Whoever was in the morgue, it wasn't her son. "Who do you work for? The NSA? Hawkins Lab?"

O'Bannon was staring at something over his shoulder, fear written on his face. Hopper turned to look and saw a long black car parked at the edge of the lot behind him.

"Who is that?"

"You're gonna get us both killed."

"Who is that?" Leaving O'Bannon, Hopper started toward the car. "Hey! Hey!" He pulled his gun, running toward the car, which pulled away before he could see the driver in any kind of detail. He considered shooting at the car, but that would make a lot of noise out here in public, and he didn't know nearly enough yet to take the risk.

When the car was gone, he looked around and saw that O'Bannon had fled, as well.

That was probably okay—he thought he'd gotten as much from the trooper as he was going to get. No, now he had to go see the body, and find out why no one was supposed to come close to him, and how they had made whoever it was look so similar to Will that it had fooled his own brother.

Another trooper, this one looking very young, was on duty outside the morgue, engrossed in a book. *Cujo*. Hopper approved.

"Hey," he said, smiling as he approached the young trooper. "I love that book, that's a ... nasty mutt."

The trooper was on his feet immediately, book down, hand on his

gun, standing in front of the door. "You can't be back here."

It was nice to be tall. Hopper towered over this kid by several inches, and he made them feel, even as he kept smiling. "Yeah, I just got off the line with O'Bannon, he said that he needs to see you at the station, it's some emergency ..."

The kid wasn't biting. "What the hell you talking about? I don't work with O'Bannon."

"Did I say O'Bannon? I meant—" He wasn't going to find another name. The hell with it, anyway. He'd at least tried to play this straight. "Okay." And he hauled off and punched the kid.

Two strikes and the young trooper was down for the count. Hopper felt bad about the headache he would have later.

Grabbing the keys off the trooper's belt, he let himself into the morgue, looking around all the while to make sure no one was watching. One trooper, that was all they'd left here? If he'd been trying to hide something, he'd have left more.

The morgue was silent, dark, and a little bit spooky. Hopper usually wasn't troubled by fears of this nature—his own demons were more than enough nastiness lurking in the dark—but this was ... different. His heart was pounding. What was he about to find?

Will's body, or whoever's body was standing in for it, was in the second drawer down. Hopper pulled out the drawer and took the sheet off the face. Damn, but it sure looked like the kid he remembered meeting at the movie theater.

He walked away from it, thinking of dead children and grieving parents and anguish and heartache and loss. But that was his story. Maybe it didn't have to be Joyce's. Getting a grip on himself, he returned to the body, pulling the sheet back the rest of the way off the torso. Immediately, he could see a problem: The chest was smooth. There had been no autopsy. Was this why they had sent Gary away, so no one would know they hadn't cut into the boy?

Hopper put his hand on the chest, and then took it away, frowning at

it. The skin felt strange. Spongy? Not quite firm enough? Something was definitely not right.

Damn it, he was going to have to cut into this child's body. Could he really do this? If this wasn't Joyce's son, it was someone's. Shouldn't he have more respect? But something was off about it, and he wasn't going to know what it was if he didn't at least look.

Opening up his pocket knife, he started to make the cut, but pulled the knife away before it made contact with the skin. This was awful. He couldn't help seeing Sara there, Sara lying alone and cold in the dark.

But this wasn't Sara. And all signs pointed to it not being Will, either. He had to know.

This time, he made the cut, deep and sure. The skin was surprisingly tough to cut through, and it felt as though there was nothing inside the body to cut into.

He pulled the sides of the skin away from the opening he'd made, plunging his hand into the cavity before he could think better of it—and came away with a handful of fluff. This wasn't a kid at all, not a human. This was a doll, filled with the same kind of white stuffing a plush animal was filled with.

His first reaction was pure anger. How dare anyone put someone through what Joyce and Jonathan were going through, faking the death of a child? What kind of monstrous asshole did that?

His second thought was Joyce. She needed to know.

Hopper wanted to run out of the morgue to her and tell her what he had found, tell her she had been right all along, and this wasn't Will ... but what good would that do? She knew she was right. She knew this wasn't Will. She had said so, in the face of skepticism and despite what she knew it sounded like to others. What she didn't know, and what this wouldn't tell her, was where Will was—and there was only one place Hopper could think of where he could get that answer for her.

He had to go to the lab.

15. Crazy

Thank you for reading!

"Crazy"

Crazy, for thinking that my love could hold you

I'm crazy for trying and crazy for crying

- Patsy Cline

Joyce was sitting in the wreckage of her living room when car lights shining through the window woke her from the near-stupor she had fallen into, exhausted and riddled with guilt for having had to send Will away instead of being able to go in there—wherever there was—and fight that monster for him.

Hopper? she thought, squinting blearily in the light. Jonathan? Surely it was time for Jonathan to be coming home by now.

She pushed herself up off the floor and went outside in time to see a snazzy black car pull up. Joyce had never seen it before, but she recognized it anyway—it was Lonnie's. He always managed to have a cool black car, no matter how dire the rest of his circumstances might have been. His wife and children might be down to their last box of macaroni and cheese, but the car got taken care of.

The last thought flickered through her mind without emotion. Whatever Lonnie had done before, he was here now. He was Will's father, and Will was gone, and Lonnie had come.

"Hey. Babe." He came toward her now, concern written in his face. "What the hell happened?"

Without thinking Joyce reached out her arms and Lonnie held her. Being in his arms felt so familiar and safe. Lonnie always knew what to do. He would know what to do now. She could relax.

And with that thought, she fell apart, weeping against his shoulder as

she had countless times before when things got to be too much. And as he always did, he kissed her hair and held her and promised her that everything would be all right, that he would take care of everything.

Too tired to do anything more, Joyce believed him, letting him lead her inside the house.

Hopper pulled up to the lab, near the woods, what the kids had called, what was it, Mirkwood?, and got out of the truck, bringing the big wire cutters with him. He cut the fence, slipping in with more noise than he would have liked. Might have to think about cutting down on the beer.

As he moved through the grounds, he was glad for his training—after his visit to their security room, he remembered most of the places their cameras covered, and could see some of the others, so he arrived at a side door undetected. Then he waited until two of the scientists came out so he could grab the door before it closed behind them, slipping in without need of a card to open the door.

It looked like an office. A bare, cold, uninviting office you would never want to work in, sure, but an office nonetheless. Normal.

Hopper moved quickly but cautiously down the halls. It was late enough at night that most people had left for the day, but there were still a few out and about who he had to avoid. He wasn't even sure what he was looking for until he found it: a hallway blocked off with plastic and marked with big yellow hazmat warning stickers.

Hazmat. Well, hell.

Nothing for it but to go in, and worry about the consequences later. Would anyone really notice if he grew a second head, anyway? He unzipped the plastic and stepped through the opening.

This hallway was much more clinical. No more wood paneling. This was all in white tile, with harsher, more industrial lighting.

It ended in a turn and a pair of doors that were locked against him.

Only a card was getting him through these doors. Damn it.

Behind him, he heard the familiar click of a gun being cocked, and a security guard's voice saying "Hands up. Hands. Up."

He obediently put his hands up, turning around. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa." Two of them, one the managerial type in a suit who had shown him around earlier. So he hadn't avoided all the cameras as well as he'd thought. Great.

Managerial type made that point, with a smirk that Hopper wanted to wipe right off his face.

But he couldn't, because he was busy trying to think of a plausible lie. "Look, Dr. Brenner asked for me specifically. Okay? How else do you think I got in here?"

Manager took one hand off his gun, reaching for the walkie at his belt. The uniform behind him looked confused. His gun was still up, but he was waiting for the suit to tell him what to do. "What's your name again?"

"It's Jim Hopper. Chief Jim Hopper," he said, as though they were idiots for not knowing. Honestly, they really were. You want to run something shady in a town, you get to know the people who might stumble on your operations so you know how to deal with them. Stepping forward, he positioned himself, and while the suit was talking into the walkie, Hopper decked him. He grabbed the gun while the suit was falling and had it pointed at the uniform before he could react. Pushing the uniform against the wall, Hopper grabbed his gun out of his outstretched hand. The walkie was burbling to itself on the floor, the suit's message having gotten through, at least partially, but Hopper was distracted by the card clipped to the uniform's shirt pocket. "Hey. You might if I borrow this thing?" He ripped it off the shirt. Still holding the gun on the uniform, he ran the card and stepped through the doors.

As soon as the door closed behind him, he shot the card reader on the inside, hoping that would buy him some time before they could get through after him.

Lonnie walked Joyce into the house with an arm around her shoulders. "Tell me everything. Tell me about our boy. I came as soon as I heard they found— What the hell?" He was looking around at the living room, the furniture tumbled here and there, the lights across the ceiling,

"He was here, Lonnie. He was here. The lights were blinking, one for yes and two for no, and then some ... thing came through the wall at me." She gestured vaguely at the broken wall. "And then Will was in the wall, it was pink and I could see him, and the thing was coming and I—I told him to run. And now he's gone." Her face crumpled, but she was too tired and drained to cry anymore.

Frowning in confusion, Lonnie asked, "That was how he ended up in the quarry?"

"No. He was never in the quarry."

"But the body?"

"That's not Will. It's—they faked it, somehow, I don't know."

Lonnie was silent, looking at her, and she braced for his skepticism. But instead, he led her to the couch. "Come on, why don't you sit down. You look exhausted." He picked up a blanket and draped it over her shoulders. "And you must be freezing. All right, you stay there and I'll get something to warm us up."

She wasn't surprised when he unerringly found the last bottle of vodka in the house and brought it over, pouring some into two glasses.

"Here. Drink this. It'll calm your nerves. And help you think straight, yeah?"

"I don't know what to do."

"I know. I know." He sounded like he really did know. Maybe this thing with Will had reminded him that he had a family, sons who needed him.

"This whole time, I ... I could—I could feel him. He was, he was so

close, he was right there." She gestured at the wall, remembering Will's small pale scared face through that pink wall. "I knew he was alive. Our hands—our hands were ... almost touching. Now it's like I ... Now it's like I can't feel him anymore." Like she had sent her little boy away from the only place he felt safe, and lost and alone out there that thing had caught him. She couldn't bear to think of it; she couldn't stop thinking of it.

Lonnie didn't respond, and she glanced at him, seeing that same long-suffering expression on his face that she had seen too much of in her life.

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like, how everybody's looking at me, like I'm out of my damn mind."

"Hey." He took her hand, his fingers warm on hers. "You're not going to like this, but I think you need to seriously consider the possibility that all this—it's in your head."

Joyce groaned. Of course he would say that.

"Remember your Aunt Darlene?"

"No. No. This is not that."

"When something like this happens, your mind makes up stuff. For you to cope, you know? I mean, Jesus, there's a funeral tomorrow for our little boy and you're saying his body's fake. He's in the wall. I mean, how do you explain that?"

Joyce didn't know how to explain it. What if he was right? What if Hopper had been right? What if she wanted Will, her boy, her artist, to be alive so badly she had made this all up?

"How do you explain that?" Lonnie continued. His voice was soft, reasonable.

He was trying to help. And maybe he was right. Maybe Will had never been in the lights, or in the wall. Maybe he was just a kid who

had run off because he heard something in the woods and tripped and fell into a quarry, and now he was dead, and there was nothing strange about it. Strange was exhausting, and scary. Maybe grief would be ... less scary.

"It doesn't make sense. It doesn't. At least go talk to a shrink or ... what about Pastor Charles, or someone—"

That cut through the fog of misery closing around her. "They can't help." Joyce should know. She'd gone to Pastor Charles before, and come home with an earful of a wife's duty to her husband.

"Joyce, you just told me that Will is gone. What else is there to do?"

He was gone. Will was gone. Either she had lost him today when she sent him away, or earlier when he never came home, but there was no more Will. She had to live with that, even if she didn't know how to. She swallowed down the glass of vodka and poured herself another, and she and Lonnie sat there drinking as they had done so many nights before.

Beyond the locked doors, everything was dark and silent. No one worked here now, that much was clear. Hopper pulled the flashlight out of his pocket, shining it ahead of him, calling Will's name as he made his way through the shadowy halls.

One room held what must have been a child's bed, still neatly made up with blanket and stuffed animal sitting on it. A childish drawing was taped to the wall. Had Will been kept here? He must have been.

Feeling an urgency now, Hopper rushed through the halls, calling Will's name again and again.

He came to a pair of double doors, hearing some kind of alarm on the other side. Or possibly behind him, it was hard to say. He punched a button next to the doors, hoping it would open them.

Behind him, voices. They were catching up. They couldn't catch up until he had found Will, or at least what had happened to him. What Hopper would do after that, he couldn't have said, but that was a

problem for later. For now, Will.

Behind him, the doors opened. It was an elevator. He ducked in as soon as the door was open far enough to do so, and punched the button on the wall. Not a lot of choice for floors.

Security came around the corner, shouting for him to stop, as the elevator doors closed.

When they opened again, he thought he was in a nightmare. The place was pitch black and dead silent, and something was floating in the air. Like snowflakes. Or ash.

The elevator doors closing behind him felt like they were cutting him off from everything. He could only imagine how Will must have felt if he had been down here. If he still was down here.

The floating things in the air grew thicker as he went farther, and it was getting harder to breathe.

And then he found it. Whatever it was. Whatever he had been looking for, no question this was it.

"What the hell," Hopper whispered, moving toward it.

The walls of the room were covered in slimy black vines of some kind, and in front of him more vines laced over an opening in the wall ... an opening that looked like something out of a horror movie.

Jesus Christ. If this was real, if he was really standing here, then maybe Will had been talking to Joyce through the lights. Anything was possible.

Hopper moved closer, reaching out to touch the slimy ropes, like a really big, gross spiderweb, that covered the hole.

Behind him, something moved, and he whirled around, reaching for his gun, moving back through the room.

A person in a white hazmat suit was coming toward him, and Hopper backed away. Then a gloved hand was over his mouth, a sharp pain stabbed him in the neck ... and blackness.

16. Dust in the Wind

Thank you for reading!

"Dust in the Wind"

I close my eyes

Only for a moment, and the moment's gone

All my dreams

Pass before my eyes, a curiosity

- Kansas

Lonnie and Joyce were still sitting together on the couch, reminiscing about old times, the vodka bottle nearly empty, when Jonathan came in.

"Hey, kid."

Jonathan glared at his father. "What's going on?"

"Your dad's gonna stay here tonight," Joyce said, hastening to add, "on the couch."

"I'm here as long as you need me, okay?"

Lonnie sounded reassuring to Joyce, but Jonathan wasn't hearing it the same way. When it came to Lonnie, he never had.

"How you holdin' up?" Lonnie asked, but Jonathan was crossing the living room to lift the tarp that covered the hole in the wall, and he ignored his father's question.

"What happened?"

"Don't worry about that," Lonnie told him.

Continuing to ignore his father, Jonathan stepped toward Joyce.

"Mom. That thing you saw, before— Did it come back?"

Joyce wasn't sure what to answer. It was easier now to believe she had imagined it all, that she had chopped a hole in the wall for no reason.

"Jonathan," Lonnie said sharply. "That's enough."

Finally, Jonathan looked at his father, the two of them staring at each other in one of those silent battles of wills that was so exhausting. Joyce could feel her eyes closing. Maybe she could sleep now, maybe ... if they would just be quiet for a minute.

Jonathan and Lonnie stepped into Jonathan's room. She didn't want to listen, so she didn't.

She was barely aware of Lonnie helping her to her feet and leading her to the bedroom, or of Jonathan coming in later to touch her hair and make sure she was covered. All this time that Will had been gone, she had avoided sleep, wanting to be awake if he needed her, but now she reached for it desperately, for the blackness that could make her forget all of this had ever happened.

In the morning, nothing felt any better. Even the sleep hadn't helped, so dark and dreamless. Joyce felt like she was moving through cotton, everything dulled and far away. She let Jonathan make her breakfast and dutifully ate it, she let Lonnie pick out her clothes and she put them on, but none of it felt like her. None of it felt real.

Dimly in the back of her mind she thought that Will, yesterday, in the lights and in the wall, that had felt real. This felt like a nightmare.

But she pushed the thought away. She had made that up. That kind of thing was for books, and movies, not real life.

Sitting on Will's bed, she wanted to stay here, where everything was familiar and seemed like him. She didn't want to go to some funeral preached by a man she barely knew. That wouldn't seem like Will. But she took Lonnie's hand anyway, and she went.

She greeted everyone as they arrived. Most seemed to assume she needed space, and made their murmurs brief before moving away to

wait for the start of the ceremony.

The cold pinched the edges of the fog, and she could hear bits and pieces of the smarmy claptrap Pastor Charles was spouting. That wasn't Will. That didn't have anything to do with Will. *Talk about Will!*, she wanted to shout at him. But she didn't want him to talk about Will, because this wasn't Will.

Except that it was, she reminded herself. It had to be. Little boys didn't disappear into the walls and the lights.

When the pastor's droning finally stopped, she got up and followed Jonathan and Lonnie to the grave, dropping a rose on top of the casket. This still felt less real, less like her boy, than yesterday. When would this start to feel like her life? she wondered wearily.

Standing there, she heard the Wheelers come up and hug Lonnie, shaking his hand, expressing their condolences. Since when were the Wheelers such great friends with Lonnie? Joyce wondered. Ted had never come over to drink a beer when Lonnie lived there; Karen had never invited the Byerses to one of her fondue parties.

But that didn't matter, either. What mattered was trying to wrap her head around the idea that this was her Will being buried here.

She would never make him another peanut butter sandwich.

She would never buy him another box of crayons.

She would never hear another tale of Will the Wise.

She would never make him laugh again.

She would never do anything Will's mother had done again.

With that thought, she finally mustered the strength to move away from the gravesite.

Hopper awoke with a jolt, his heart pounding. He was covered in sweat, lying here on the couch—his couch. In his own place.

What the hell?

Then it all came flooding back. The fake body, Hawkins Lab, that freaky hole in the wall ... everything.

Next to him, the table looked like he had had the party to end all parties. Empty beer cans and pills were strewn across it. Well, they knew their shit, he'd give them that. Some mornings, his table really did look like that.

He grabbed his gun off the table and ran for the door, but there was no one out there. Nothing.

Inside, he looked carefully at his neck in the mirror, remembering the sharp, stabbing pain. Yeah, there was a red mark where they had tranked him. So they'd tranked him, they'd brought him home, they'd probably tossed the place looking to see what he knew, and ... they'd bugged it. Of course they had.

Frantically he started searching for the bug. Every lightbulb, wall socket, picture frame, cabinet, utensil, battery holder, under the table, in the phone. He broke the phone apart to look inside the plastic casing, ripped open his couch cushions, took apart his stereo—and finally he found it. Inside the overhead light, the most amateur place he could think of. He hadn't even looked there first because he didn't think anyone was that obvious anymore.

He dropped the bug on a table and crushed it with an ashtray, making a good job of it. Taking pleasure in it.

A pounding on the door nearly made him jump out of his socks. He grabbed for the gun—and nearly shot poor Phil in the face.

"Jesus, Chief, you all right?" Powell asked him.

"What are you doing here?"

"We tried callin', but, uh ..."

"Yeah, the phone's dead." And it was going to stay that way.

"So, Bev Mooney came in this morning all upset, said that Dale and

Henry went hunting yesterday, and they didn't come back home."

Powell added, "She thought they were on another binger, but—she's not so sure now."

"I think this whole Will Byers thing has everybody on edge."

Dale and Henry? Missing? Same as Will? If there was a big hole into ... somewhere at the bottom of Hawkins Lab, who knew what might have happened. "Where was this?"

"It was at the station."

"No, where did Henry and Dale go hunting?" Some days, he missed working with real cops.

"Oh. Uh ... out near Curley."

"Mirkwood," Hopper muttered.

"What?"

He ignored the way they were both looking at him, as though maybe he wasn't quite all there. If this was how Joyce had felt, he owed her an apology. Hell, he owed her one anyway. "Okay. You go back to the station, I'll take care of this. All right?"

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Leave it."

"Oh," Phil added. "They found Barbara's car."

"What?"

"Barbara Holland's car?" Powell reminded him.

He remembered now. Red-headed girl, gone missing after a party. Missing. Another one.

Powell added, "Seems she ran away after all. Staties found it late last night at a bus station."

Staties found it? Then she was ... wherever Will was. Wherever that hole led. Had to be. What the hell was going on here?

Phil said, "Funny, right. They keep doin' our job for us."

"Yeah. That's funny," he said. Funny was a word for it, all right.

He shut the door in their faces. There was work to do.

Joyce suffered through the potluck, quietly in her seat sipping truly terrible coffee while Lonnie buttered up all the attendees. Very few people spoke to her beyond a strained smile and a careful pronouncing of her name, but Lonnie was all over the room, talking to everyone, his face just the right kind of sad.

In the light of day, she remembered what he was like, all the manipulations, all the fake charm. What was he doing now? He didn't even live here—why was he talking to all of these people like they were still neighbors?

Probably it was nothing, but in the face of having to think about Will, either in the wall or in the ground, thinking about Lonnie was familiar, easy, and annoyed Joyce just enough to start blowing away the fog that had surrounded her all day. Maybe she might even start feeling like herself again if she could just focus on how annoyed she was at him long enough.

17. I Can See Clearly Now

Thank you for reading!

"I Can See Clearly Now"

I can see clearly now the rain is gone

I can see all obstacles in my way

Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind

- Nash

It was a relief to get home and change out of the too-fancy funeral clothes, to feel normal again. To feel like Will's mom, and not like whatever unnatural creature had attended that funeral.

Joyce felt enough better that she was able to lie down and think about taking a nap, letting herself pretend everything was normal long enough to drift away.

But she was awakened all too soon by a banging from the living room. Wandering in there still half asleep, she found Lonnie, still in his dress shirt from the funeral, nailing boards over the hole in the wall. Well, apparently he felt right at home, then. This was new, Joyce thought. If he had spent more time at home fixing things up years ago, none of them might be in this situation now.

"What are you doing?" she asked him.

"What does it look like I'm doing? You want to freeze to death all winter?"

She didn't have anything to say to that. Not that she had entirely wanted to freeze, and she would have fixed the wall eventually, but his attitude seemed completely unnecessary.

Something else seemed off about the room. She looked around vaguely for a second before she realized: He had taken down all the

lights. They lay neatly coiled in piles.

"I told you not to take these down!"

"They were in the way, babe. How long are you going to keep those up? I mean, really."

Joyce just glared at him and started putting the lights back up. She may not know exactly what had happened to Will, or where he had gone when she told him to run, or how it was that they had buried a body that looked exactly like him, but she knew that as long as there was any chance at all that her boy might need her again, those lights were staying right where they were.

She had forgotten what it was like to have someone else around who thought they were in charge ... and she didn't entirely like it. This had been her house too long for her to want someone else to come in and start messing with her things.

They worked for a moment in silence before Lonnie remarked, "You know, it's a shame what they've done to this family."

"What?"

"The Sattler Company. I went to the quarry on the way over here. I just wanted to look around, you know? Couldn't believe it. Just couldn't believe it." He positioned another nail in the board and started hammering. "No warning signs, no fence, no nothing. Ought to be held accountable, if you ask me."

Since she had never believed that body in the quarry was Will's, Joyce had never given that much thought. She supposed he was right, if some child had fallen in, it might have been better if there were signs.

"So, what, you want to talk to them, get them to put up signs and a fence, keep this from happening to some other kid?"

Lonnie glanced at her, placing another board. "Something like that, yeah."

"Huh." Joyce kept hanging the lights, glad Lonnie hadn't pulled out

all the nails. That sounded surprisingly nice of him. She'd never known him to worry about other people. Maybe he was turning over a new leaf, strange as that sounded. But ... if Will really was—gone, then maybe that had shaken Lonnie up, made him think about what was really important. Stranger things had happened.

Lonnie finished boarding up the hole, stepping back to look at what he had done. "If I say it myself, I do nice work."

"Yeah, that's great. Thanks."

He looked at her, watching her standing on top of the coffee table to attach the lights to the ceiling. "It's a start." Clearing his throat, he said, "I think I'll go take a shower."

"Sounds good. You need towels?"

"I know where they are."

Joyce rolled her eyes. Maybe he did know where the towels were, but he didn't have to make it sound so ... intimate. What did he think was going on here? Did he think she'd be so grateful for his help that she'd fall right back into old habits, bad habits? Maybe she would have, once, but not now. Not anymore.

Waiting until she heard the splashing of the water that indicated he had stepped into the shower, she took his bag, which he had left out on the chair, and opened it, digging around. There was always something with Lonnie. It was never straightforward. It was always something he wanted, she reminded herself.

And then, in his wallet, she found it. A folded up paper—an ad for lawyers. "Accidental injury or death," it said. "Let us fight for you."

How could she have been so stupid as to think he was really here for Will? God, would she never be done falling for Lonnie's crap? Of course he was here to see what he could get out of this. It sickened her. His own son. Her boy. And all Lonnie could think about was money.

It took all she could do not to storm in there and pull him out of the shower—but she didn't want either one of them to be naked for this

conversation.

She waited until he came out, all satisfied with himself. He'd put on cologne, for God's sake. He really did think he could just walk right in here and everything would fall into his lap, didn't he?

Wordlessly, she held out the paper.

"I can explain."

"Can you? Can you explain why you had a lawyer's ad in your wallet? Is that why you came?"

"I came for you! I came for Will."

"You didn't come for us!" He could make her mad so fast. She wanted to punch his lights out. "You were here for the money!" She shoved the paper at his chest.

"No!"

"Just the money! Admit it," Joyce demanded. "You weren't here 'cause of Will, you never cared about him! You never did!" How could she have believed he would suddenly care now, when he never had before?

"Jesus, Joyce, it was his funeral today. Do we have to do this right now?"

"I can't believe I fell for this."

"I'm here to help, Joyce."

"To help?"

"We could use that money for good."

"Oh, like, you mean, to pay off your debts?" She knew he had some. He always had some.

"To pay for Jonathan to go to school."

"Oh!" How dare he. How dare he come in here and pretend to be a

concerned father wanting to provide for his family. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Lie to me!"

"I'm not lying to you!"

"Yeah? Well, where does he want to go? Huh?" Let him answer that one, if he was such a caring father.

"What?"

"Where does Jonathan want to go to college?"

"We get that money, anywhere he damn well pleases!"

"NYU, Lonnie!" she screamed at him. "He's wanted to go to NYU since he was six years old!"

"So then he goes to NYU!" he screamed back.

He had never known. Not that, or anything else about the boys that mattered, because what his kids wanted, or needed, had never mattered to him. Joyce swore she would never fall for this again, not for so much as a second. "Get out. Get out!"

Lonnie changed tactics, suddenly calm and charming with that little cocky smile that worked for him so often. "You need me here, Joyce."

"Oh, brother, I have not needed you for a long time." She shoved him back away from her.

"Oh, no? Look what happened." This time, his smile was the one that said he held the winning card. She hated this smile, and what he was implying. Like she was the bad parent, when he had run off and left them entirely.

"Don't you dare. At least I was here!"

"Come on, Joyce! Just look around this place. All your Christmas lights. What the hell am I supposed to think, you're such a great

mom? You're a mess."

"Maybe I am a mess," she told him. "Maybe I'm crazy. Maybe I'm out of my mind. But God help me, I will keep these lights up until the day I die if I think there's a chance that Will's still out there." She picked up his bag and shoved it at him. "Now, get out! Get out of my house!"

"You won't get a penny of that money."

"Yeah, well, I hope you don't get it, either. Because that wasn't Will."

"You're a nutcase," he told her as she pushed him out the door.

"I'd rather be a nutcase than abandon my children."

He scoffed at that one, but he went, getting into his car and driving away. Joyce stood there watching him, shaking, until she was sure he was gone, then she went back inside to finish hanging the lights.

In the ruins of his trailer, Hopper wrestled with belief. That Hawkins Lab had covered up whatever had really happened to Will he could buy. But if that was true, then ... what Joyce was saying was true, too, or it could be. Will was in the lights, or the wall. How? Hopper didn't know. This required—faith. Understanding. Imagination. And he had buried all of those with Sara. He didn't know how to get them back, not even now when another child's life hung in the balance.

Lost, scared, not sure if he could do the job that lay ahead of him, he did what he always did when he didn't know what else to do. He reconnected the phone and dialed a familiar number, listening to the ring.

It surprised him when Diane picked up, her clear, crisp voice coming to him through the phone lines. "Hey," he said.

Her voice changed, softening, but also becoming wary. "Jim?"

"Yeah."

Diane sighed in exasperation. "Why are you calling me here? I told

you not to call me."

"Yeah, I know, I know. I just wanted to—just wanted to hear your voice." Once upon a time, talking to her at the end of every night had grounded him, made him a better cop, reminded him that everyone he dealt with all day wanted just this—to go home to their family. He had forgotten that recently. He continued, haltingly, not sure just how to say what he wanted to say, "And, uh, I just wanted to say that, um, even after everything that happened, I don't—I don't regret any of it. And those seven years, they were ... everything to me."

"Have you been drinking?" she asked, in the tone of a woman who had heard it all, too many times before.

"No," he told her. "No."

In the background, he heard a baby crying. Diane's baby. That had never stopped hurting, that she had been able to move on and start over. He heard her shushing the baby, softly, in the same loving tones she had used with Sara. For once, he wasn't angry with her, or bitter. Just ... envious. Just thinking that maybe it might be nice to move on, if only he knew how.

"You know what, actually I have been drinking," he said at last, as the baby kept crying and Diane kept soothing it. It was easier this way. "I'm sorry."

"Jim. I can't ..."

"Just take care of yourself. Okay? Say hi to Bill for me." As he put the receiver down, he heard her ask, "Are you sure?"

And for once, he was. That life was gone. It was over and done with. He had a new life now, and it needed him to be on top of his game.

18. Twist of Fate

Thank you for reading!

"Twist of Fate"

This is a new beginning

I'm back in the land of the living

- Olivia Newton-John

Joyce almost had all the lights back up when someone knocked at the door. Banged on it, more like, obnoxiously on the glass, so she couldn't possibly miss it. It could only be Lonnie, back with some new way to pitch his greed, and when was he ever going to learn that when she said no, when she said get out, she meant it?

"Go away, Lonnie."

He didn't. He banged on the door some more. Furious, she threw the lights she was untangling on the floor and marched to the door. "Seriously! I am gonna murd—" The words died on her lips when she opened the door to find Jim Hopper standing there, holding a finger to his lips and a sign that said "DON'T SAY ANYTHING". "What?" she mouthed, taking the sign as he pushed his way into the house.

Hopper looked around, seeing all the lights hanging from the ceilings. Damn it, he had forgotten those. "Oh, Jesus," he muttered. This was going to take them all night. He reached up and unscrewed the nearest bulb, looking at the socket carefully. Then he pointed to Joyce, and to the bulb, and to the rest of the lights.

Her eyes widened, and she mouthed, "Seriously?"

He nodded, and kept unscrewing light bulbs. Joyce grabbed a crayon that lay on a table nearby and followed him, scribbling on the other side of the paper. She held it up to him. "What are we looking for?"

Taking the crayon, he scrawled "Bugs" on the paper.

"Bugs?" she mouthed. Then she shrugged, climbed on top of the coffee table, and started unscrewing light bulbs.

At last Hopper took out the last bulb. He was breathing hard—it had been a damned long day, and he hadn't stopped for so much as a cigarette in hours. But it looked like they were clear. There was no sign anyone had bugged Joyce's house. "Okay," he said, sinking into the nearest chair. "Should be okay. I mean ... I can't guarantee it, but it should be okay."

"What the hell's going on, Hopper?"

"They bugged my place."

"What?"

"They bugged my place," he repeated. "They put a microphone in the light." He sighed, sinking further back into his chair, feeling a strange sort of safety for the first time all day, here with her. "It's because I'm onto them and they know it. I don't know ..."

"Who?" Joyce broke in.

"I thought they might be watching you, too. I don't know, the CIA, the NSA, Department of Energy, I don't know."

"You've got to explain this to me, 'cause I am not—"

"I went to the morgue last night, Joyce."

She froze, terrified of what he might say. All day she had managed to push thoughts of that body away, of what it might mean, and here was Hopper with this crazy story saying he'd been to the morgue. "What?"

"It wasn't him."

For a second, she wasn't sure she had heard him right. She had known it, in her heart, but to hear Hopper confirm it was a whole different thing. "What?" she repeated, needing to hear it again.

"Will's body. It was a fake."

Joyce sank down in front of him, shaking with relief—not just to hear Hopper confirm that body hadn't been Will's, but to know she wasn't alone in this any longer. Hopper knew. And Hopper got things done. She thought back to high school, all the times she had gone to him for help and he had been there.

Hopper leaned forward in the chair, putting a hand on hers, holding her gaze steadily so she would hear him say it, clearly and distinctly. "You were right. This whole time, you were right."

She couldn't help the smile that came to her face, or the tears that came to her eyes. She clung to his hand like a lifeline.

"Joyce," he said gently. "I'm going to help you. We're going to find Will. I promise. But you have to tell me again, everything, from the beginning."

"From when Will was lost?"

"From the phone call."

"I ..."

"But first—do you have any coffee?"

She looked at him, really looked at him, for the first time since he came to the house. "Have you eaten anything?"

"Not today."

"All right, let's get you something to eat." She tugged on his hand, pulling him up out of the chair and leading him to the kitchen. The refrigerator was pretty bare. "Turkey okay?"

"Anything."

"Okay." She pulled out the turkey and some wilted lettuce and the mustard.

"The phone call, Joyce."

"Right." She thought back as she assembled the sandwich, wanting to

get this right. "The first phone call, there was just breathing. Scared breathing. And I called to him. 'Will?', I said, 'Is that you?', and the breathing changed. It was him, Hopper, I know it was him."

"I know, Joyce," he said patiently as she dug into a cupboard, finding a half-full bag of potato chips and putting it down in front of him next to the sandwich.

"So then I bought a new phone, and I waited, and the second time, I heard him. He said, 'Mom'. And then the phone shorted out again and turned black, like the first one had. Only this time I noticed the lights were blinking. But only in one place." She got out the coffee and the filters. "Then they blinked again, farther down the hall. So I followed it. And then the music came on in Will's room, this song he really likes, and the light got bright, so bright. I didn't know light bulbs could be that bright. And then the wall bulged, like something was coming out of it."

"The creature."

"But I didn't see him that time. I ran. But when I was about to drive away, the music came back on. Will stayed with me there in his room most of that night, blinking the lights on and off, but I couldn't figure out how to talk to him. So I bought all these lights on credit—Donald wasn't happy about it, but he did it—and hung them up, and he led me through the lights to the cupboard in the wall."

Hopper ate his sandwich and tried to follow the story, which got more convoluted as it went, as she consciously tried not to be defensive about it, to believe that he believed her.

"And I asked him if he was alive and he said yes, and I asked him if he was safe and he said no." Her face crumpled, and she held on to the sink. "But I couldn't ask him how to get to him," she went on, gathering herself together, "so I put up the lights with the letters, and I asked him where he was, and he said 'right here' and I asked him what he wanted me to do and he said 'run'. That's when the creature came out of the wall, and I ran. I got the axe later, but I forgot I had it. If I had only had the axe when the wall turned pink ... God, I sound like a fucking maniac."

"Yeah, you do, but I believe you," Hopper reassured her.

Joyce nodded, sniffing a bit as she reached for the coffee cups. "I heard banging on the wall, and I ripped the wallpaper and the wall was pink, like ... skin, or muscle, or something, and I could see Will through it, but I didn't remember the axe was there, so I couldn't get to him, and that thing was coming, and I told him to run and hide, and then ..."

"That was when I came."

"Yes. And I couldn't feel him here any more. Before I could feel him. I knew he was here. Now ..."

"We'll find him, Joyce. I promise." He reached for her hand as she put the coffee cups down on the table. "I promise."

"Thank you, Hop." They looked at each other for a second, then she squeezed his hand and let it go, reaching into the refrigerator for the milk. "Now, tell me. Why did you go to the morgue? I thought you thought I was crazy."

"I did," he admitted. "But then ... they sent state troopers to take care of the body."

"Who's they?"

He shrugged. "Them. I don't know. But they sent Gary home, Gary's our coroner, and I thought why the hell would they do that for some kid from Hawkins, you know?" He glanced at her, hoping she wouldn't take offense, but she was nodding as she lit her cigarette. "So I went and talked to the cop who found the body, and he was ... weird. Not right at all. And he said his orders were to keep everyone away from the body. Which meant something was wrong with the body. So I went to the morgue, and they hadn't done an autopsy at all. Nothing. And I—I cut into it, and it was a doll. Stuffed with stuffing, you know, that cotton stuff?"

"A doll? Not even a real person? I knew it!" Joyce leaned forward, her eyes bright.

"I know you did."

"So then what did you do?"

"I thought about coming straight here, telling you that you were right, but ... you knew you were right. So I went to the lab, to see what was going on there, and ... at first it looked like just an office, and labs, you know? But then there was this room where a little kid had lived—"

"A little kid?"

"Yeah, it had a small bed and some toys and things, but there was no one there, like it was abandoned. Like that whole section was abandoned. So I kept going and I went down the elevator—and the bottom floor of that place is like nowhere you ever saw. Like a horror movie. Dark and cold and there are things floating in the air."

"That's what Will said! He said it was dark and cold and like home."

"Maybe. There's some kind of viny hole in the wall, like a door into somewhere in a dark forest."

"And then what?"

Hopper shook his head, taking the cigarette casually from her, just another shared cigarette like hundreds before in high school. Some part of his mind was so at ease, back here with her, just like nothing had ever changed. "Then they cornered me and drugged me, and I woke up back at my place with drugs and beer cans and booze bottles all over the place, like they wanted anyone I talked to to believe I was out of my head. Not too far off for me these past few years," he admitted.

Joyce put a hand on his reassuringly. "What you went through, you're allowed to go crazy for a while."

"Yeah, but I'm done with that now."

"Good." There was a silence while Joyce lit another cigarette, since it seemed obvious Hopper wasn't about to give her first one back. She sat forward. "We've gotta go through this again."

"I told you everything that I saw."

"Just tell me again."

"Upstairs or downstairs?"

"Upstairs."

"There was a laboratory where they must do experiments or something, and then there was ... there was this kid's room."

"How do you know it was a kid's room?"

Hopper leaned his head against his hand. God, he was exhausted.
"More like a prison."

"Why would you think it was a kid's room, then?"

"Because, I told you, the size of the bed, there was a drawing, there was a stuffed animal—"

"You didn't say there was a drawing."

"Yeah, there was a drawing, of an adult and a child. It said 11 on it ..."

"Was it good?" Joyce asked.

"It was a kid's drawing, Joyce, it was stick figures." What did it matter how good it was?

She got up and grabbed a paper from another table and brought it over, putting it down in front of him. It was ... must be characters from that game the kids played, and they were admittedly good. The kid had talent.

"It wasn't Will," Joyce said, certain of it.

Hopper looked at the drawing. No, this was not the same kid who had done the stick figures in the lab. It had never occurred to him that it might not be Will. Then the pieces fell into place. A kid, a kid at Benny's, Earl saying the kid had a shaved head and Hopper assuming someone had taken Will and shaved his hair off so he would be harder to identify. "Earl," he said, getting up and going over

to the couch, where his papers on this case were strewn across the coffee table. "The night that Benny died, Earl said he saw some kid with a shaved head with Benny." He sat down on the couch and Joyce followed him, sitting down next to him. "Now, I pressed him, he said it might be Will, but maybe ..."

"Maybe, it wasn't?" Joyce asked.

"Look. This woman, Terry Ives, she claims to have lost her daughter, Jane. She sued Brenner, she sued the government ... Now, the claims came to nothing, but what if— I mean, what if this whole time I've been looking for Will and I've been chasing after some other kid?"

"Well, how does this help us find Will?"

"If we go talk to this Terry Ives, maybe she can tell us what that thing is in the basement of the lab, and where it leads, explain what the hell is going on over there." He yawned suddenly.

"All right." Joyce stood up. "I'm going to get you some blankets, you're going to sleep on the couch, and we're going to go find this Terry Ives in the morning. And if she doesn't know anything, I'm going to track this Brenner down and get some answers."

Hopper smiled sleepily. "You almost sound scary."

"What I've gone through these past few days? I feel scary."

He caught her hand. "Hey. We're going to find him."

"I know we are. And Hopper? Thanks."

"I wish I'd figured it out sooner."

"You caught on soon enough." Joyce squeezed his hand and went to get the blankets. Will was still lost, but she wasn't, and now she could find him, with Hopper's help.

19. She's Not There

Thank you for reading!

"She's Not There"

Please don't bother trying to find her

She's not there

- *Zombies*

They took off in Joyce's car first thing in the morning, after the first restful night's sleep Hopper had gotten in who knew how long. Joyce's couch wasn't much more comfortable than his ... but for the first time in years, he'd had something to think about other than Sara when he closed his eyes.

Joyce had tossed and turned, too excited to be on the way to finding Will and too worried about where he might be and if he had found somewhere safe to hide to rest ... but she was used to fitful sleep, and morning found her up and dressed with the dawn.

Hopper drove. He always had, fast and confident, like he loved it. Joyce didn't love driving so much, so she was happy to let him. They stopped first at a pay phone. Joyce had replaced her second fried phone, but Hopper didn't trust the lines at her place not to be bugged, so he called his old friend Frank from a phone on the other side of town from Joyce's house, just to be safe, in order to get Terry Ives' address.

They drove mostly in silence, lost in thought. Hopper reached for the radio once, but the first song was too cheerful and the second was a sappy love song and he decided silence was golden, at least for now.

The house, when they found it, was deep in the woods, off by itself, and hadn't had a good handyman work on it in quite some time. Everything was neat as a pin, but older, shabby. Terry Ives must have spent all her money on lawsuits, Hopper speculated.

The woman who answered the door turned out to be Terry Ives' sister. Hopper's badge got her to stop looking like she was going to get a shotgun and run them off the property, but there was hostility in every line of her body.

At last she said, "Well, you can come in, but if you want Terry to tell you anything, you're about five years too late."

With that cryptic comment, she led them into a room where a woman who looked a lot like her sat watching *The Price Is Right*.

Joyce approached her, introducing herself and explaining the situation ... but there was no response, unless you counted the way Terry Ives' eyes closed when Joyce said her daughter's name. It was the only change in her expression, her breathing, or anything about her.

Moving closer, Joyce unfolded the poster of Will, holding it up in front of Terry Ives' face. The eyes focused briefly on Will's picture, then blinked slowly as the head turned again toward the TV.

"What's wrong with her?" Hopper asked the sister.

"I told you, you're wasting your time." And then, in the neat but cluttered kitchen, she explained. "She was a part of some study in college."

"MK Ultra," Hopper supplied, remembering his reading.

"Yeah, that's the one. It was started in the '50s. By the time Terry got involved, it was supposed to be ramping down, but the drugs just got crazier. Messed her up good."

"This was the CIA that ran this?"

The sister looked at him with cynical amusement. "You and Terry would've gotten along. The Man, with a big capital M. They'd pay a couple hundred bucks to people like my sister, give 'em drugs, psychedelics, LSD, mostly, and then they'd strip her naked and put her in these isolation tanks."

"Isolation tanks?" Joyce asked.

"Yeah, they were these big bathtubs, basically, filled with saltwater so you can float around there. You lose any sense of, uh, sense and feel nothing, see nothing. They wanted to 'expand the boundaries of the mind'. Real hippie crap. I mean, it's not like they were forcing her to do any of this stuff. The thing is, though, is that she didn't know she was pregnant at the time."

"Jane." Joyce leaned across the table. "Do you have any pictures of her?"

There was a moment when the sister looked at them like they were both crazy. "I don't think you guys understand," she said at last. "Terry miscarried in the third trimester."

They looked at her and at each other in shock. Nothing in the articles had indicated that ... and if there was no Jane Ives, who was the child who had lived in the lab? Who was the child at Benny's?

The sister took them to a nursery still completely fitted out, let them look around, explaining that Terry believed her daughter was still alive, and claimed she was 'special', born with abilities that the sister explained as being like something from Stephen King. She laughed at their expressions, their response to what she considered make believe.

Joyce might have thought of it as make believe, too, but she had seen Will through her wall, when it suddenly turned pink and began to pulse as though it was alive. If that was true ... well, she felt for Terry Ives. If it was her, she would have kept the nursery together, too.

They thanked the sister for her time—or, Hopper did. Joyce stopped in the doorway, wanting to talk to Terry Ives, wanting to tell her that she believed her, that they would look for her Jane just as they looked for Joyce's Will. But the empty stare kept her from going any closer. Terry probably wouldn't hear her, anyway, and why raise her hopes?

She got in the car with Hopper feeling all the positive energy she had woken up with drained away, gone somewhere far away with Terry Ives' mind, barely able to hold herself together. Was that where she

was destined, to be sitting in a rocking chair mindlessly watching TV while Will stayed missing forever? The tears she had hoped were gone threatened to overwhelm her.

"Hey," Hopper said.

"What?"

"We're gonna find him."

"Yeah, like Terry found her daughter?"

He closed his eyes briefly. He had felt the pain of that sad, frozen house and the two women who lived in it, too. "We're close," he assured her.

Joyce looked at him in disbelief. Close? "Twelve years," she reminded him. "Twelve years she's been looking for her!"

"Then she shows up at Benny's five nights ago, which means we've got a chance. You know what I would give? For a chance?" The pain in his voice was raw and fresh. "You know what I would give?"

She did know. Not just because she knew how hard she would hold on for Will—how hard she had held on already—but because the scars his loss had left on him had been so clear to her ever since he had come to town. She would have given almost anything for him to have that chance, too, just to see him be happy again.

Before she could say anything, the walkie-talkie on the dash crackled to life. "Hey, Chief, you there? Hey, Chief."

He picked it up, putting on his cop face with an obvious effort. "Yeah, go ahead."

"Yeah, fight broke out here and—"

"Powell, I don't have time for this!"

"It's Jonathan Byers. You haven't seen Joyce, have you?"

Jonathan! Joyce felt a rush of guilt—she hadn't even wondered where

he spent last night or what he'd been doing, so caught up in the mess with Lonnie and with Hopper's story. Then it struck her. Jonathan? Fighting? Jonathan never fought. He hid, yes, but he didn't fight.

"Yeah, I'll—get her," Hopper said slowly. "We'll be there in an hour."

"Okay, Chief."

"Jonathan," Joyce said helplessly as Hopper put the walkie talkie back on the dashboard. "What on earth?"

"Let's go find out." He looked at her as he turned the key. "You all right?"

Resolutely, she put the empty gaze of Terry Ives out of her mind. "I'm all right."

20. Carry On My Wayward Son

Thank you for reading!

"Carry On My Wayward Son"

Once I rose above the noise and confusion

Just to get a glimpse beyond the illusion

- Kansas

Joyce worried all the way to the police station. "What could Jonathan be thinking? He never gets in fights. He doesn't talk to people!"

"Don't have to talk to someone to hit 'em—or to want to hit 'em," Hopper offered.

She gave him an exasperated look. "He's not you, Hopper."

"Maybe not, but everybody gets mad sometimes."

"That's true. I almost hit Lonnie yesterday."

He glanced at her sharply. "Lonnie was here?"

She frowned, then remembered he hadn't been at the funeral because he'd been drugged by whoever ran Hawkins Lab. "He came for Will's funeral—at least, that's what he said. Really he came because some cheap lawyer convinced him he could get money suing the quarry. God, I can't believe I was so stupid I nearly fell for that!"

"I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"Yeah, me, too. Of course, you and Lonnie getting in another fight wouldn't have been quite the right tone for a funeral."

"Probably not. He's gone now, though, right?"

"Gone for good," Joyce confirmed. "Never again."

"Good."

They left the topic alone after that. Lonnie, and all their history around him, was a conversation for another time. If—no, *when*—they found Will.

Joyce was out of the car and on her way into the station almost before Hopper had the car in park, but Hopper wasn't far behind. The last thing Joyce needed was her older son going around and getting in fights, and he intended to get the kid alone and give him a piece of his mind.

They found Jonathan and a girl Hopper didn't recognize sitting at Powell's desk, both looking dejected.

"Hey! Jonathan? Jesus, wha—what happened?" Joyce gestured to the towel full of ice he was holding.

In Hopper's view, the kid looked pretty good. Nothing but a bruise on the cheekbone.

"I—I'm fine."

As Phil got up and came toward them, Joyce gestured at Jonathan's wrists. "Why is he wearing handcuffs?"

"Cause your boy assaulted a police officer, that's why." Even Hopper didn't like Phil's condescending tone, and it positively enraged Joyce.

"Take them off," she demanded.

"I am afraid I cannot do that."

"Take them off!"

Hopper decided it was time for him to intervene. "You heard her. Take 'em off."

"Chief," Powell said, "I get everyone's emotional here, but ... there's something you need to see."

The two of them led Hopper to Jonathan's car, parked behind the

station, and popped the trunk. Inside was a box with a gun, ammunition, lighter fluid ... and a bear trap. A bear trap? Last bear seen around here was five years ago, and those guys were probably drunk. It seemed like a pretty big coincidence that Jonathan's brother went missing, his mother saw a strange creature coming out of the wall, and Jonathan had a box of weapons in his car. This all had to be connected.

"Yeah, okay," he said to the two cops. "Leave this to me. I'll talk to them."

Both of them looked perfectly content to leave Jonathan—and Jonathan's mother—in Hopper's hands. He lifted the box out of the car and carried it into the building, dropping it on the desk in front of Jonathan and the girl.

"What is this?" Joyce asked, looking over the contents.

"Why don't you ask your son. We found it in his car."

"What?" Joyce asked.

Jonathan ignored her, his eyes blazing at Hopper. "Why are you going through my car?"

Hopper leaned over him. "Is that really the question you should be asking right now?" He held the kid's gaze for a moment. "I want to see you in my office."

"You won't believe me."

"Why don't you give me a try?"

They stared at each other, then Jonathan got to his feet, disbelief and distrust in the defiant way he refused to look at Hopper as he did so. Powell looked nearly as unhappy when Hopper gestured to him to uncuff the kid, but he did it.

The girl came, too, and so did Joyce. Hopper dropped his jacket and hat and leaned on the edge of the desk while everyone else took the chairs. "Now," he said, "start from the beginning."

Jonathan looked at his mother, who nodded. "It's okay, Jonathan. He knows everything."

"It started when Barbara went missing," the girl said.

"Barbara Holland?" Hopper remembered the report on his desk. So much had happened, he hadn't had time to chase it down, but he thought he remembered hearing the car had been found somewhere. "I thought she ran away."

"No. No, she didn't. She's—something happened to her. We were at a party and I left her alone, and ... then she was gone."

"So your friend disappears, you decide to be Nancy Drew."

The girl crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "That's not funny."

"No, it's not."

"Hop, this is Nancy Wheeler," Joyce said. "Her brother Mike is one of Will's best friends."

He remembered Mike. "The less annoying one."

Nancy frowned. "That's one way to put it."

"Anyway, so you decided to go look for your friend. How's Jonathan come into this?"

"Because he was in the woods—" Nancy looked helplessly at Jonathan, clearly not wanting to get him in trouble.

"I was looking for Will, taking pictures, hoping to see something in the picture I couldn't with my eye. That happens sometimes. A lot," he amended.

"And I ended up with one of the pictures, and I asked Jonathan about ... some thing that was in it. We went out looking to see if we could find any sign of it, and ... we did." Nancy shivered a little. "There was a deer. It was hurt, and—bleeding, and then ... the thing was there. Eating it. Eating the deer. And then I thought—Barb had cut her hand, at the party. She went for a Band-Aid, but ..."

"We think it's drawn to the blood," Jonathan added.

"Then we got separated and I was running from the thing. There was a hole in a tree that I went through, and on the other side ... I don't know where I was. It was like I was still in the same forest but it was all cold and gray and misty, with things floating in the air."

Hopper and Joyce glanced at each other. Will's description of where he was; the basement of Hawkins Lab.

"How did you get back?" Joyce asked urgently.

"Back through the hole, just as it was closing."

"So if Will's there and he could find another hole ..."

Jonathan put a hand on Joyce's arm. "Maybe." He looked at Nancy. "Show them the picture. It's pretty blown up, but ... yeah, that's what we saw eating the deer."

Nancy pulled a picture out of the inside pocket of her jacket and handed it to Joyce, who gasped.

Jonathan and Hopper both looked at her. "That what you saw?"

Joyce nodded, handing the picture up to Hopper. "That's it."

It was pretty grainy, like the kid had said, but pretty scary for all that. Hopper wouldn't want to run into this thing in the dark—or see it coming through the wall of his house. He looked at the kids. "You say blood draws this thing?"

"We don't know."

"It's just a theory."

Joyce bit her lip, the story getting to her. To think all that time when she had been worried about Lonnie and off with Hopper, Jonathan had been out there risking his life chasing down this monster—chasing it down because she hadn't been strong enough to go after it. "Hop," she said suddenly. "Can we have a minute?"

He didn't look up from the picture. "Yeah. Take your time."

She tugged on Jonathan's shoulder, pulling him out into the hallway.

Jonathan didn't wait for her to start. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"You're sorry? You're—you're sorry? That is not good enough, Jonathan."

"I know."

"It's not even close, it's not even in the, in the ballpark."

"I wanted to tell you, I just ..."

"What if this thing took you, too?" she asked him. "You risked your life! And Nancy's."

"I—I thought I could save Will. I still do."

"This is not yours to fix alone! You act like you're all alone out there in the world, but you're not! You're not alone."

"I know," he muttered.

She shoved him back. "Damn it, Jonathan."

"I know."

"Damn it!" She grabbed his jacket by the lapels, and reached up to put her arm around him. Her boy. Her responsible boy, who took care of his brother and took care of her and did it all without asking for anything. They held each other tight.

Shouting voices from the main office broke into the moment, and the door to Hopper's office flew open next to them.

"Stay here," he told them, heading down to see what the ruckus was about.

Some woman in a suit was facing off against his two cops. She had a kid with her, maybe 12 or 13 years old, with his arm in a sling.

"What the hell is going on here?"

"Chief—" Phil started.

"These men are humiliating my son!"

"No, no, no, okay, that's not true."

"There was some kind of fight, Chief," Powell explained.

"A psychotic child broke his arm!" the woman shouted.

"A little girl, Chief. A little one." Phil gestured with his hand to indicate the size of the girl.

The woman whirled on him, jabbing a finger into the air in front of his face. "That tone! Do you hear that tone?"

"Honestly, I'm just trying to state a fact."

Hopper had heard enough. "I don't have time for this. Will you please take a statement?" Silently he mouthed "And get her out of here" while the woman's head was turned away from him.

As he walked away, Phil asked the kid what the girl had looked like.

Speaking up for the first time, the kid said, "She had no hair, and she was bleeding from her nose. Like a freak!"

No hair.

Hopper stopped walking and turned around. "What'd you just say?"

"I said she's a freak!"

"No, her hair. What'd you say about her hair?"

"Her head's shaved. She doesn't even look like a girl." The kid stared up at Hopper until he remembered something that made him look away. "And ..."

"And what?"

"Tell the man, Troy," the kid's mom encouraged him, no longer shouting, which was a relief.

"She can—do things."

"What kind of things?"

"Like—make you fly. And piss yourself," he muttered.

"What?" Powell asked.

Hopper held up a hand for quiet. "Was she alone?"

The kid shook his head. "She always hangs out with those losers."

"Losers? What losers?"

"Mike Wheeler and those dorks."

Mike Wheeler. Hopper looked at Powell. "Get the statement." Then he turned on his heel and hurried back to his office. "You. Nancy. Your brother, he's got a new friend? A girl?"

"Mike and a girl? I don't think so."

"A bald kid. She doesn't look like a girl."

Nancy shook her head. "No. No one like that."

"Come on, we're going to go talk to him anyway."

"Mike? Mike doesn't know anything!"

"Yeah, let's find out."

He shepherded them all down the hall in front of him. Joyce hung back enough to whisper, "Is it her? The girl from the lab? Is it ... Jane Ives?"

"I don't know, but it could be. Bald, and he said she could make you fly. And piss yourself."

Joyce raised her eyebrows. "She made Troy Walsh piss himself? I like

her already."

21. As Long As You Follow

Thank you for reading!

"As Long as You Follow"

I've been wandering

Gone away too far

But the road was rough

To get back where you are

- Fleetwood Mac

Something told Hopper not to go straight to the Wheelers', and he blessed that old second sense. It had gotten him out of a lot of tight places, in the army and as a cop, and now. A line of long black cars, governmental cars, was parked in front of the Wheelers' house, and there were men carrying boxes of items out of the house.

"What's going on?" Nancy asked as Hopper eased the car into park.

"I don't know." He got out, taking the binoculars Joyce handed him with only an instant of surprise that Jonathan had been carrying binoculars and that Joyce knew he would want them. As he studied the men moving like ants in and out of her house, Nancy got out from the back seat and stood at his elbow.

"I have to go home."

"No, you can't."

"My mom! My dad, are there."

"They're gonna be okay," he reassured her absently, taking a step toward the line of black cars as he thought things over rapidly. Mike had to be with the bald girl. There was no other explanation. She had been the one held in that room, she had escaped, and they were

looking for her, hunting her down, because she was valuable. Their experiment. So, the boys go out, against his express instructions, hunting for Will, and they find the girl, running from Benny's. They bring her home, they hide her, they protect her.

Nancy went around him, marching down the street.

"Hey." He caught her by the arm. "Hey. Hey hey hey!"

"No! Let go!"

"Hey. Listen to me, listen. The last thing in the world we need is them knowing you're mixed up in all this."

"Mike is over there!"

"They haven't found him," Hopper told her. "Not yet, at least." He pointed at a chopper in the sky.

A chopper over Hawkins. That would get some press.

Nancy stared at it in shock. "For Mike?!"

"Come on, get in the car." He dragged her with him as he went back. Once they were all inside with the door closed, he leaned on the seat, looking at the two kids in the back. "Look, we need to find them before they do. You have any idea where he might have gone?"

"No, I don't!" Nancy proclaimed loudly.

This was no time for sibling fights. "I need you to think."

"I don't know! We haven't talked a lot, I mean, lately."

"Is there any place that your parents don't know about that he might go?" Joyce asked. She was racking her brains, too, but Will liked to have some secrets, and she trusted him—and she was too tired half the time to keep tabs on everywhere he went. That was going to have to change once he was home again, she promised herself.

"I-I-I don't know," Nancy stammered, clearly too distressed and too scared to stop and think logically.

"I might," Jonathan said suddenly. He had been sitting and thinking calmly while the rest of them were panicking, the way he so often did. Joyce was proud of him and despaired of him and his solitude at the same time.

"What?" Hopper asked.

"Well, I don't know where he is, but ... I think I know how to ask him. We have to go to my house."

Joyce and Hopper looked at each other. "You think they'll go there if they don't find her at Mike's?"

"I think we better get there before they think of it." He put the car in gear and resisted the urge to floor it, not wanting to attract the attention of the men in the black cars.

The house was blissfully deserted for the moment, and none of them wasted any time piling out of the car. Nancy stopped in the living room, staring at the lights and the destruction, but there was no time to answer her questions. Later, maybe.

Jonathan led them into Will's room, skirting the lights and hunting through the desk drawers. Joyce had caught on by now to what he was thinking of, and she got down on her knees, hunting under the bed. It was there, the reassuring piece of black plastic. "I got it!"

Nancy sank down on the bed while Jonathan showed her how to use the walkie-talkie. Sitting on the bed next to Nancy, Joyce noticed how they looked at each other and then hastily away as their fingers touched in the process, and wondered what was going on there, but this was hardly the time. Jonathan withdrew across the room.

Nancy spoke into the walkie-talkie cautiously. "Mike? Are you there? Mike?" Then she took her finger off the button. "Do you think they're listening?"

Hopper frowned. He did think Hawkins Lab was listening, but this was the best plan they had. "We're assuming Mike will have his receiver with him. We'll have to hope they haven't finished looking for clues at your house and thought about tracking the kids down this

way."

Nancy nodded. She pressed the button. "Mike? It's me, Nancy." She waited a second and spoke again. "Mike, are you there? It's Nancy. Mike, we need you to answer. This is an emergency, Mike." There was an edge in her voice now. "Do you copy? Mike, do you copy?" She looked at Joyce. "What will we do if he doesn't answer?"

"We'll think of something. Just try him again. They're—they're probably scared, just give him some time."

"We need you to answer!" Nancy repeated into the walkie-talkie. "We need to know that you're there, Mike."

Hopper snatched the walkie-talkie out of her hands. "Listen, kid, this is the Chief. If you're there, pick up. We know you're in trouble and we know about the girl. We can protect you, we can help you, but you gotta pick up. Are you there, do you copy? Over!"

Nothing. Static. He put the useless thing down on a shelf. "Anybody got any other ideas?"

Then it crackled to life, the kid's voice coming through, thin and scared. "Yes. I copy. It's Mike. I'm here. We're here."

Hopper picked the walkie-talkie up again, speaking slowly and clearly. "Look, kid, we need to be able to get to you. We can help, I promise."

"How do I know no one's listening?"

Smart kid. "You don't. Neither do I. They're distracted right now, we might have some time, but we gotta move, okay, kid?"

"Okay. We're at the old junkyard. You know where that is?"

"The old junkyard?" They'd have been run out of the newer one, but the old one was abandoned. He knew that, but Hawkins Lab or whoever those guys were, they might not. "Yeah. Hang tight, kid, I'm coming to get you. Do not go anywhere, no matter what, copy?"

There was a pause while Mike tried to decide if this was a trap, and

then, "Copy."

Hopper looked around the room. "You all stay here. I'll be back."

Immediately all three started to argue with him, and he quelled them with one of his patented cop looks. "That car going to hold all of you and four kids? No? Then I'm going and you're waiting here."

it seemed to take forever to get there, the car moving sluggishly under him. Probably it was fine, but it seemed all wrong, used as he was to his bigger, more powerful car. And when he got to the junkyard, the suits in the black cars had gotten there first. Damn it! Those kids had to be terrified, certain that he had betrayed them.

On the other hand, it felt pretty good to beat up a bunch of guys in suits who were terrorizing children in his town. He waded in, no fancy moves or ruses, just fists and faces and the satisfying thud of men dropping out of his way. The kids were clearly holed up in the abandoned school bus, and he took the stairs as soon as the last suit guy was on the ground. There they were. The Three Musketeers, and their D'Artagnan, a bald little girl in a dirty pink dress.

"All right, let's go." When none of them moved, he shouted it again. "Let's go!" This time, when he hurried down the stairs toward the car, four scared and tired kids hurried after him.

22. Ain't Even Done with the Night

Thank you for reading!

"Ain't Even Done with the Night"

Well I'm tellin' ya that I don't know if I know what to do

You say that's all right, hold tight

Well I don't even know if I'm doing this right

- John Mellencamp

It seemed to take an eternity for Hopper to go to the junkyard and collect the kids and get back. Joyce and Jonathan and Nancy tried to make small talk, but they ran out about the time Joyce asked Nancy how her mom was. Nancy gave her a look, Jonathan gave her a look, and they all subsided into sitting and watching the window and fidgeting.

When the lights of the car finally appeared in front of the house, they all jumped up immediately and ran for the door. It felt better to Joyce to have the boys here. While Will and his friends didn't spend a ton of time in her house, it was enough that she knew them all, and Will felt closer with them present.

Nancy ran past her and hugged Mike, who clearly wasn't expecting that at all, and didn't like it much, standing there stiffly while she held him. "I was so worried about you!"

It was obvious to Joyce that Mike hadn't given a thought to his sister—and why would he? Presumably he didn't know about Barb or the monster or any of what had happened. "Yeah, uh ... Me, too?" he said dutifully.

Looking past him at the unfamiliar figure with the shorn hair, wearing a fairly incongruous pink dress, Nancy frowned. "Is that my dress?"

No one answered that, the boys and the child looking around awkwardly.

They brought the kids inside. "Anyone hungry?" Joyce asked, not surprised when the answer was an all-around yes.

She started to get things out for sandwiches, but Jonathan pushed her gently aside. "I've got it, Mom."

"But—"

"No. You and Nancy go fill them in. I'll take care of this."

Joyce squeezed his arm in gratitude. "Thank you." She went back into the living room, walking straight to the little girl. "Are you all right?"

A slow, silent nod.

"My name's Mrs. Byers. Joyce. My son is missing. Did Mike tell you?"

"Will," the girl whispered.

"Yes, Will! Have you—" She caught herself. The girl already seemed overwhelmed enough. Joyce didn't want to add to that by drowning her with questions. "I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Eleven."

"Eleven?" There wasn't much to say to that. Poor thing, raised in a lab without even a real name. "Welcome, Eleven. This is Chief Hopper, whose bark is worse than his bite, and this is Nancy, and in the kitchen is Jonathan, Will's brother. We're going to help you."

"Eleven can help, too," Mike put in. "She's strong and smart and ... she knows things."

The girl gave him a grateful glance. Yes, no question, Mike had been protecting her. Joyce wondered if Karen Wheeler knew this strange girl had been in her house for, what, days at least.

Dustin was staring at Nancy. Some things never changed—Dustin always stared at Nancy. But this time it was with curiosity rather

than fascination. "Why are you here?"

"Because my friend Barbara was taken."

"Taken?" Lucas echoed.

Nancy pulled out the picture. The silent girl flinched when she saw it. "You know this thing?" Nancy demanded.

"Leave her alone!" Mike said instantly.

"Hey," Hopper told him, "simmer down. It's just a question." He looked at the little girl with a gentleness that forcibly reminded Joyce of what he had lost. "You recognize the thing in this picture?"

Eleven nodded, her eyes wide in her pale face.

"Do you know where it comes from?"

She nodded again.

Quickly, Hopper explained to the boys about the lab. They already knew about Hawkins Lab's involvement—they had fled Mike's house just before the men in the black cars and the other men in the white vans had arrived. Dustin explained with wide excited eyes how Eleven had flipped a truck completely over.

Hopper and Joyce exchanged looks. Terry Ives had been right. If this was her daughter, as Joyce suspected she was, her little girl was an extremely powerful human being. Joyce wished she could tell the other woman—but if she couldn't, the next best thing she could do would be to take good care of her little girl. She made sure Eleven got the first of Jonathan's grilled cheese sandwiches and a generous helping of potato chips to start with.

"All right, kids, start talking. Wait." Hopper held up a hand when all three boys started at once. "Let me talk and you fill in the blanks. You found the girl in the woods." Nods all around. He looked at Eleven. "You were at Benny's, weren't you? Big guy, fed you?"

She nodded, pain in her eyes. So she knew what had happened to Benny. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"That wasn't your fault. Okay? Not your fault."

It had been a long time since Joyce had seen that much tenderness in Hopper's face, and she was glad to see he was still capable of it.

"So then you boys took her home and hid her, yeah? And in the process you made that kid piss himself and broke his arm?"

There was no pain in Eleven's face when she nodded this time.

"She saved me," Mike said. "I was going to fall into the quarry, and she saved me."

Joyce realized the boys didn't know about the fake body. "Will didn't fall into the quarry. He's alive. The body was a fake."

"We know." Dustin looked at her with sympathy. "We could hear you talking to him. He's in the Upside Down."

"The Upside Down?" Hopper asked, while Joyce grasped Dustin's arm and gasped, "You know where Will is?"

"Kind of." Dustin gestured to Mike, grabbing a sandwich off the plate. "You tell 'em."

"Okay. It's the flea and the acrobat."

"The what? Come on, kid, it's been a long day. Talk sense," Hopper complained.

Mike took a piece of paper and made some sort of drawing on it. "Okay," he said again. "So in this example, we're the acrobat." He pointed to a stick figure standing on a line. Then he pointed to something underneath the line. "Will and Barbara—and that monster—they're this flea. And this is the Upside Down, where Will is hiding. Mr. Clark said the only way to get there is through a rip of time and space."

"A gate," Dustin clarified.

"That we tracked to Hawkins Lab."

"With our compasses."

As usual with these guys, Joyce was impressed by their collective intelligence—and couldn't follow it at all. She looked questioningly at Dustin.

"Okay," he said, "so the gate has a really strong electromagnetic field, and that can change the directions of a compass needle."

"Is this gate underground?" Hopper asked.

"Yes." The single soft word had come from Eleven. She was looking at Hopper, who was looking at her, the two of them understanding each other.

"Near a large water tank?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"H-how do you know all that?" Dustin asked him.

"He's seen it," Mike guessed.

"Is-is there any way that you could, that you could reach Will?" Joyce hated to ask it of Eleven, who looked exhausted and underfed and generally in need of love, not of being asked to do impossible things—but Will was still out there, had been out there for days, and Joyce needed to know he was still okay. "That you could talk to him, in this —"

"The Upside Down," Eleven confirmed.

"The Upside Down, yeah."

The girl nodded.

"And my friend Barbara," Nancy added. "Can you find her, too?"

"Yes."

They gave Eleven Barbara's picture, and the walkie-talkie, and gathered around her while she sat at the table, closing her eyes and

concentrating.

Joyce watched in fascination and terror and wild worry as the little girl's face tightened, her closed eyes moving, the walkie-talkie emitting bursts of static. The lights flickered.

Eleven's eyes opened and she looked at Joyce in pain and embarrassment and a little touch of fear. She was used to being punished when she let people down, Joyce realized, certain scenes of her own life coming back to her and making her feel a sudden kinship with this unusual child. Then Eleven spoke, her voice trembling. "I'm sorry."

Clinging to Jonathan's hand as it rested on her shoulder, Joyce could feel her fear rising. "What? What's wrong? What happened?"

"I can't find them."

Joyce barely held back tears, and Jonathan had to turn away. Eleven got up and rushed to the bathroom. "What did that mean?" Joyce asked the boys. "Is Will—gone?"

"No," Mike said immediately.

"I don't think so," Dustin said. "I think her battery's low."

"Her what?" Hopper asked.

Mike explained, "Whenever she uses her powers she gets weak."

"The more energy she uses, the more tired she gets."

"Like, she flipped the van earlier," Lucas added.

"It was awesome."

"But she's drained," Mike said.

"Like a bad battery."

"How do we make her better?" Joyce asked.

"We don't. We just have to wait and ... try again."

"Well, how long?" Nancy asked.

Mike shrugged. "I don't know."

"Bath."

Joyce turned at the sound of Eleven's voice. "What?"

"I can find them ... in the bath."

"What kind of bath? Like, run you a bath in the tub?"

"No, it was ... different." Eleven was clearly unused to speaking so much, and to such a large group. She looked at Mike, appealing for help.

He shook his head. "I don't know."

"I do." Hopper looked at Eleven. "The tank, right? They used the water in the tank to boost your abilities?"

She nodded.

Joyce remembered what Terry Ives' sister had said. "The isolation tanks! Saltwater!" She looked at Hopper for confirmation.

"Yeah. That's it." Hopper looked around at the boys. "Any of you science ... kids know how to make a sensory deprivation tank?"

They looked blankly at each other. Then Dustin grinned. "But I know who does. Can I use your phone, Mrs. Byers?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

They waited while Dustin called Mr. Clark and talked him into giving him the directions over the phone, despite the late hour. He hung up, looking at Joyce across the table. "Do you still have that kiddie pool we bobbed for apples in?"

"I ... think so, yeah," she answered, looking to Jonathan, who nodded.

"Good. Then we just need salt. Lots of it."

"How much is lots?" Hopper asked.

Dustin did some quick math. "Fifteen hundred pounds."

"Well, where are we going to get that much salt?" Nancy asked.

"I know." Hopper got abruptly to his feet. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Where do you think there's a whole warehouse full of salt?" he asked her.

"Chief, you're a genius!" Dustin said, delighted. He frowned at the rest of him in disappointment when they still didn't get it. "The salt they use on the roads in the winter!"

There was a chorus of understanding. They piled into Hopper's truck and Jonathan's car and drove to the school. Joyce was glad to be going—if the people from the lab knew about Mike, they probably knew about Will, and it was only a matter of time before they made their way to her house.

23. Bridge Over Troubled Water

Thank you for reading!

"Bridge Over Troubled Water"

I'll take your part, oh, when darkness comes

And pain is all around

Like a bridge over troubled water

I will lay me down

- Simon and Garfunkel

Hopper and Jonathan did the heavy lifting, moving bags of de-icing salt from storage onto a cart, while the others got the kiddie pool set up. Hopper tried not to think of what a long day it had already been and how much longer it was going to be, and how much he'd like a cigarette and a beer and a hot shower.

"Wait," Jonathan said, catching one of the bags. "It's not going to snow next week, is it?"

"Worst case, no school."

"Even if you find Will in there, what are we gonna do about that thing?"

Hopper had kind of hoped the question would be another softball. At least he had an answer to this one, if not the answer. "*We're* not gonna do anything. I don't want you anywhere near this, all right? Your mom's been through enough already." It was bad enough Joyce had almost certainly already lost one son. She wasn't losing both of them, not if Jim Hopper had anything to say about it.

"He's my brother!"

"Listen to me." Hopper grasped the kid's shoulder, holding on. "I'm

gonna find him. All right? You gotta trust me on this. I am going to find him." He let go, hoping he had been convincing. It was hard to do when you were pretty damned sure you were lying. But if someone was going to find Joyce's son dead, or not find him at all, it was going to be him so he could be the one to deliver the news, so he could be there to catch her.

Angry at having to lie, at the whole situation, he threw the next bag pretty hard, so that Jonathan staggered as he caught it.

"I can help," the kid muttered.

"Yeah, I know you can. But if you come help and something happens to you, who's going to be with your mom? Who's going to help her through it? I can do what I can, but she needs you. She depends on you, she loves you, she trusts you. The two of you, you're a unit, taking care of Will, and I see the way you take care of her, too. I am not going to be part of putting you in danger when losing you means Joyce loses herself, too." He caught himself, breathing hard after the speech, looking uncomfortably away from Jonathan's entirely too perceptive eyes. He hadn't meant to say anywhere near that much, to reveal how much Joyce and what she stood for, the past history they shared, meant to him.

After a few more bags, Jonathan said quietly, "Hopper."

"Yeah."

"I ... heard. About you. What happened to you. I'm ... sorry."

Hopper vividly remembered his own teenage years, and he wasn't certain he'd have been capable of the genuine empathy he heard in Jonathan's voice. "Thanks, kid," he said gruffly. "So you believe me, then? When I tell you I'm going to find him."

"I believe you will ... if it's possible." Jonathan was staring down at the bags of salt, and Hopper felt for him, for the way he had been dragged around. He had believed in the fake body, after all, and now he had some kind of hope, but the most fragile kind, impossible to trust.

Hopper didn't add any more false hope of his own. The kid had the facts down cold—Hopper would come through, if it was possible.

Joyce took Eleven into one the science classroom to let her rest while the others were filling the pool. The little girl was so silent, so watchful, but Joyce could see her thinking, learning, filling in the gaps of a life lived in a science lab. It hurt her to think of Terry Ives living a whole life without ever having seen this beautiful child; it hurt her to think that Eleven had a mother out there who loved her so much and probably knew nothing about her.

She put a hand on Eleven's shoulder and removed it immediately when the girl flinched. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Let's see, we have the water to float in, and we can keep it quiet, what else do we need?" She knew, but she waited for the answer.

"Dark."

"Right, you need darkness. What do we have here?" Joyce looked around and in a cupboard she found a pair of safety goggles and some black electrical tape. She sat down facing Eleven, covering the goggles thoroughly with the tape. "This will keep it dark for you. Just like in your bathtub." She put the goggles down, unnerved by the stillness, by the quiet willingness to put herself in a situation that must be at the very least uncomfortable, if not actually dangerous, for someone she had never met. "You're a very brave girl," she told Eleven, wanting her to know that what she was doing was exceptional. Extraordinary. "You know that, don't you?"

Eleven looked away, uncomfortable with the praise.

"Everything you're doing, for my boy, for Will ... for my family. Thank you."

There were tears slowly gathering in the big brown eyes that looked back at her so seriously, and Joyce reached for Eleven's hands,

holding them in hers.

"Listen," Joyce said, "I am going to be there with you the whole time. And if it ever gets too scary, in that ... place, you just let me know. Okay?"

"Yes."

Joyce wished it didn't have to be this way, that this child didn't have to put herself in harm's way, but there was no getting around it. "Ready?"

Eleven drew herself up, gathering some inner strength. "Ready."

"Okay." Keeping Eleven's hand in hers, Joyce got to her feet. The girl clung to her hand until they reached the door of the classroom, when she let go and walked on ahead. Watching her, Joyce couldn't help remembering Will and Jonathan as very small boys, the way they would hold her hand until just before their friends could see them and then break away, marching forward by themselves. She hoped she had the chance to watch Eleven continue to grow as she had them—the way she had started off, she was going to be quite the young lady some day.

At last the pool was ready. Eleven took off her socks and the watch she wore, which looked like Mike's, and took the goggles from Joyce, stepping into the pool. She sank down, the smocked dress ballooning up around her.

Almost immediately the lights flickered. The rest of them clung to the edges of the pool, watching as Eleven floated, there in front of them in body but in mind somewhere else, somewhere far away.

"Barb," she whispered. "Barbara?"

Next to Joyce, Nancy tensed, rising up on her knees. In the pool, Eleven shuddered, the lights dimming around them.

"What's going on?" Nancy asked.

"I don't know," Mike answered, his eyes fixed on Eleven's frightened face.

"Is Barb okay? Is she okay?"

"Gone," Eleven said tremulously. "Gone. Gone."

Nancy gasped, understanding what the word truly meant, her hand covering her mouth.

Eleven kept repeating "Gone" in more and more strident tones. Whatever had happened to Barb, Eleven was terrified. Joyce took her outstretched arm, pulling the little body close to her. On Eleven's other side, Hopper reached for her and held her hand. "It's okay," Joyce whispered. "It's okay, it's okay, it's okay. I'm right here. I'm right here, honey. It's okay. I got you. Don't be afraid. I'm right here with you. It's okay, you're safe." She kept talking repeating the comforting phrases, the ones she used on the boys in the middle of a nightmare or a crisis, until Eleven's breathing calmed.

"Castle Byers," she whispered. "Castle Byers."

Joyce looked anxiously at Jonathan. Will had to be there. Didn't he? He had to. He couldn't be gone.

Then, "Will?"

Gasping, Joyce's grip tightened on Eleven's hand. "You tell him, tell him I'm coming. Mom is coming."

Through the walkie-talkie, Will's voice came, clear but shaky. "Hurry," he said. "Hurry."

Joyce wanted to weep. Her baby was alive, but he needed her, now. She clenched her teeth against the tears. Someone else's baby needed her right this minute, and she was going to hold Eleven as long as it took. "Okay, listen, you tell him to stay where he is. We're coming. We're coming, okay? We're coming, honey!"

Eleven in the pool wasn't speaking, but through the walkie-talkie they could hear her crying in terror, and she sat up abruptly, yanking the goggles off her head. Joyce gathered her up, holding her close. "It's okay. I've got you. Oh, it's okay, I've got you, I've got you." Eleven clung to her, crying, and Joyce held her tight.